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From the Editor

I spent most of 2024 thinking ChatGPT was by far the best AI chatbot and that it would blow away its rivals over the next few years. But in January it started to give some strange and misleading answers, so I switched to the more accurate and entertaining Grok.

That too proved erratic after a few weeks, so I tried Perplexity for a while and found it to be the perfect blend of chatbot and search engine. An improved ChatGPT soon lured me back and I again began to think it would reign supreme. But I had underestimated Google's Gemini, notably how many more features it offers for free.

All this suggests one of two things: I have the attention span of a toddler when it's raining Haribos. Or chatbots are constantly improving and leapfrogging each other with superb new tools. I think it's probably the latter.

In his Cover Feature Robert Irvine tells us which one he thinks is best. And I agree with him – for today at least.

Daniel Booth
editor@computeractive.co.uk

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New date for when Microsoft will axe 365 support on Windows 10 – *p49*

HOW TO USE SNIPCA URLs

We use snipcas to turn long URLs that are hard to type into ones that are short and simple. They aren't websites themselves, which means they won't be recognised if you type them into Google. Instead, you need to type them into your browser address bar, then press Enter. Doing this will take you to the correct website.

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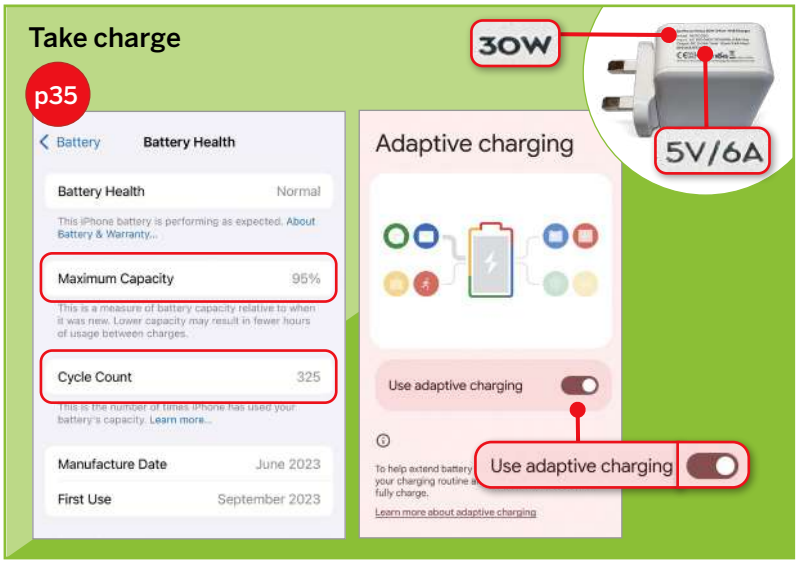


Lumma malware hits 400,000 PCs – check if yours is infected

Windows users have been urged to check whether their computers have been infected by Lumma Stealer, a highly sophisticated new malware designed to steal bank details.

It comes as Microsoft leads a huge crackdown on the threat, which has infected hundreds of thousands of computers worldwide including many in the UK.

As well as bank data, Lumma Stealer can take credit-card numbers and passwords you've saved in your web browser, meaning it can sign into your online accounts and make purchases.

Lumma Stealer spreads by impersonating safe and popular programs in web adverts and online search results, including CCleaner, ChatGPT, Notepad++ and VLC Media Player, as well as in games listed on gaming forums.

It also infects computers through fake CAPTCHA boxes and Chrome updates, and phishing emails that usually mimic trusted brands such as Microsoft or Booking.com.

To check whether you've been infected, run an antivirus scan on your computer. However, because Lumma Stealer can operate undetected you should also look for other signs of infection, including Windows slowing down or unexpected activity in your online accounts.

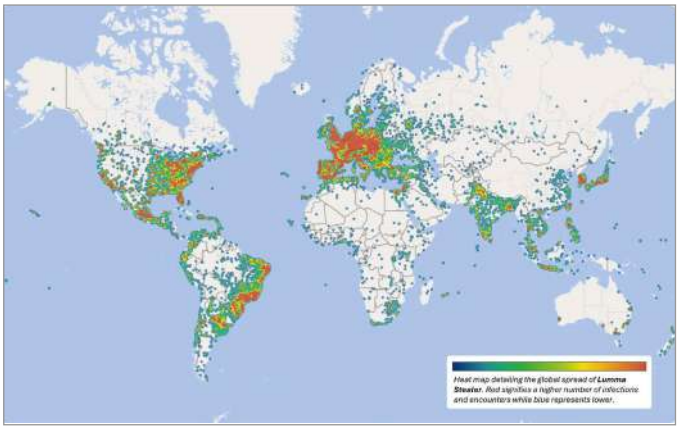
If any threats are detected, follow your antivirus software's instructions to quarantine or remove them, and change all passwords accessed from the affected computer.

Microsoft has fought back against the threat by working with Europol and the FBI to seize 2,300 domains that hosted Lumma Stealer.

It hopes this will prevent the malware from being sold to criminal gangs around the world.

Between 16 March and 16 May Lumma Stealer infected 394,000 computers, Microsoft said. A heat map it published online (www.snipca.com/54936, pictured) indicates in red where the attacks were most common.

It shows that Europe – including the UK – was badly hit, along with India, Japan, the east and west coasts of the US and parts of South America.


Heat map detailing the global spread of Lumma Stealer. Red signifies a higher number of infections and encounters while blue represents lower.

WHAT WE THINK

Lumma Stealer is one of the most aggressive threats of recent years, so we commend Microsoft for working so effectively with crime-fighting agencies. We also like its heat map showing the scale of the attacks. Some malware can seem like remote risks, and security experts often drown in jargon typing to explain the danger. Maps like this bring home just how potent and widespread modern malware is.

Netflix stops working on older Fire TV devices

Netflix has stopped working on some early Amazon Fire TV devices.

It no longer works on the original Fire TV box, the first Fire TV Stick (pictured), and the Fire TV Stick with Alexa Voice Remote – all released between 2014 and 2016.

The news isn't surprising because Amazon itself stopped providing software and security updates for these devices some years ago. They struggle to handle the increased demands of modern streaming, such as sharper picture quality and improved audio.

Netflix was removed from the devices on 3 June. The company says it has notified owners of the devices by email.

The service continues to work on every Fire device released since. Amazon's cheapest is currently the Fire Stick HD, priced £29.99 from www.snipca.com/54939.

• **Roku's new Streaming Stick Plus reviewed – page 29**

You'll like this...
Microsoft has released 50 retro Activision games for the Xbox (www.snipca.com/54937)

but not this...
Hackers have stolen personal data from UK Legal Aid (www.snipca.com/54938)

M&S confirms personal data stolen in devastating hack

Marks & Spencer has confirmed that some personal customer data has been stolen in the ongoing cyber-attack on the company.

It didn't confirm the breach until 13 May, more than three weeks after the attack began.

It said hackers might have stolen customers' phone numbers, home addresses and dates of birth, as well as their online order histories.

But it added that no useable payment or card details were stolen, nor were any account passwords.

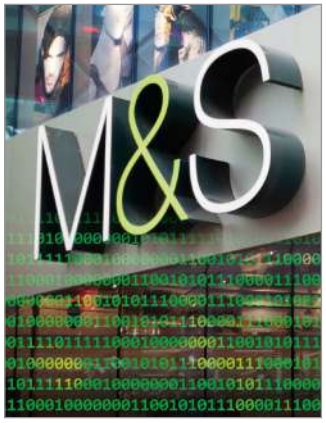
The company's last full-year results show it had 9.4 million active online customers. It didn't say how many have been affected by the hack, but will ask customers to reset their passwords "for extra peace of mind".

Chief executive Stuart Machin said the company was writing to customers to inform them that "unfortunately, some personal customer information has been taken".

"Importantly, there is no evidence that the information has been shared," he added. However, the attackers may yet threaten to leak the data online in an attempt to blackmail the retailer.

Following the breach, M&S is facing a class-action lawsuit in Scotland filed by Thompsons Solicitors. It alleges that the company failed to adequately protect customer data, exposing shoppers to potential scams.

Criminal group DragonForce claimed responsibility for the attack, which M&S said came through a third party with access to its systems.



The gang said it was also behind the attack on the Co-op around the same time. The Co-op revealed on 2 May, 10 days after the attack, that customer data had been stolen.

For updates on the M&S and Co-op attacks visit www.snipca.com/54929 and www.snipca.com/54828 respectively.

YouTube to show video adverts at precise moment you're hooked

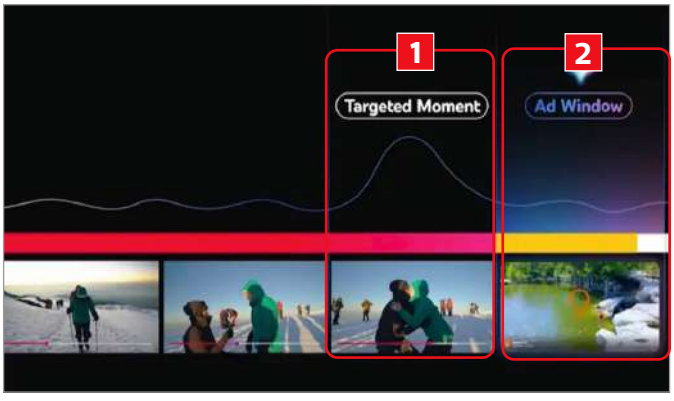
YouTube will soon start using AI to show adverts at moments in videos that viewers find most interesting.

Google, which owns YouTube, said the new feature – called Peak Points – uses its AI tool Gemini to identify "the most meaningful, or 'peak' moments within YouTube's popular content to place your brand where audiences are the most engaged" (see www.snipca.com/54923).

The idea is that viewers are most likely to be influenced by adverts at points where they are most emotionally invested in a video.

Google demonstrated the tool to advertisers and marketing companies at YouTube's Brandcast event.

It showed a marriage proposal on a ski slope, which Gemini decided was a 'targeted' – or peak – moment (1 in our screenshot), and so played an advert directly afterwards 2.



The move will please advertisers and YouTube creators, but is likely to frustrate viewers who will have to watch an advert at a time when they're most absorbed in a video.

In addition it revealed new "edge-to-edge" adverts for the YouTube homepage on TVs, and the Shoppable feature that lets viewers find more details about a product by browsing online directly from the advert.

Would adverts like this put you off watching YouTube? Let us know: letters@computeractive.co.uk

IN BRIEF

O2 FIXES FLAW THAT LEAKED YOUR LOCATION

O2 has fixed a flaw in its 4G Calling tool that exposed users' locations. It was told about the bug in March by security researcher Daniel Williams (www.snipca.com/54925) and kept it secret to prevent hackers exploiting it. Williams confirmed on 19 May that O2 had fixed it. Reports say the flaw had previously remained undetected since February 2023.

UPDATE OLD iPADS TO FIX SECURITY BUG

Apple has released an emergency security update for iPads too old to upgrade to iPadOS 18. The update (iPadOS 17.7.8) fixes problems with the previous update (17.7.7), which caused apps to log users out and change their settings. Follow Apple's instructions on installing updates (www.snipca.com/54927) and check which iPads are compatible with iPadOS 18 (www.snipca.com/54926).

TOMORROW'S WORLD

Forget about AI-powered robots running our lives – what we want is a machine that can solve a Rubik's Cube. Here's one built by students at Purdue University, Indiana, which recently set a new world record of 0.103 seconds (see www.snipca.com/54919). It's amazing, but we still prefer this astonishing *human* Cube juggler: www.snipca.com/54920.

IN BRIEF

ACER RELEASES NEW COPILOT+ LAPTOPS

Acer has released a range of new Swift laptops that meet Microsoft's Copilot+ standard, meaning they're capable of performing advanced AI tasks. The cheapest is the Swift Go 14 AI (pictured below), priced £1,399 for a 14in screen and up to 32GB RAM. See Acer's site for the full range: www.snipca.com/54912.

WIX LAUNCHES AI DESIGN TOOLS

Website-building firm Wix has launched an AI design tool to take on the likes of Canva and Adobe Express. Called Wixel, it works online (www.wix.com/wixel) and can be used to edit photos as well as create posters, flyers, invitations and banners. You get 10 daily credits and 5GB for free. We'll explain how to use it in next issue's 'In the Club' (page 48).

THE WORLD'S GONE MAD!

These women think they're hilarious for cracking an egg on this little girl's head, as part of a 2023 TikTok trend. But the mother, from Helsingborg, Sweden, has just been ordered to pay her daughter 20,000 krona (£1,540) by a court, which called it harassment. Lunacy, from start to finish.

Microsoft sued for 'overcharging' Office and Windows customers

Microsoft might have to pay billions of pounds to Windows and Office users if a lawsuit accusing it of overcharging customers is successful.

The action is being brought forward by London law firm Stewarts. It alleges that Microsoft abused its market dominance to prevent retailers from selling second-hand licences for Windows and Office products, forcing customers to buy them from Microsoft's site instead, or from resellers approved by the company.

Stewarts argues that this allowed Microsoft and its associated resellers to shut down competition and keep prices higher than they otherwise would have been.

Kate Pollock, head of competition litigation at Stewarts, said: "Microsoft's conduct has had a profound and costly impact on millions of individuals and private and public sector organisations that rely on its software for daily business operations."

Barrister Andrew Wolfson, who's leading the claim, says it "seeks to hold Microsoft to account and to secure compensation for the many affected members of the class".

He added: "With billions of pounds potentially at stake, this case is about ensuring fairness in the digital marketplace and ensuring even the largest tech companies play by the rules."

Wolfson has asked the Competition Appeal Tribunal for a Collective Proceedings Order (CPO), which would let the case proceed.

Microsoft dismissed the case as being "based on the same unsubstantiated claims regarding second-hand software licensing that have been litigated for several years in another case". It said the case is "meritless" and it will "vigorously defend" itself.

The claim automatically includes any individual, business or organisation that bought an Office or Windows licence since 2015, so you don't need to opt in.

You can learn more about the case and sign up for updates at www.microsoftclaim.co.uk.

1m customers have switched broadband with 'one touch' since September

More than one million customers have switched broadband using the faster and easier 'One Touch Switch' method since it launched last September.

The scheme was announced by Ofcom in 2021, but postponed to 2024 after broadband companies said they weren't ready to implement it.

A similar scheme has existed since 2015, whereby you have to contact only the provider you're moving to. They then get in touch with your old provider and organise the switch.

However, this scheme only covered switching between providers on the same broadband network, such as from BT to TalkTalk – which both use Openreach's cables.

The new system expanded this to cover switching between providers on different networks, such as from BT to Virgin Media, or to a local provider using its own cables.

The One Touch Switching Company (TOTSCo), the industry-led organisation, said it hit one million switches in early May, up from 920,000 on 25 April.

It achieved this milestone despite teething problems last autumn that prompted Ofcom to tell providers to keep using the existing system for six weeks.

Paul Bradbury, CEO of TOTSCo, claimed that One Touch Switch "is now well established". He added that it's able to match customer data between providers in 67 per cent of cases, up from 60 per cent at launch.

Have you switched broadband this way? Let us know: letters@computeractive.co.uk

Scroll back seven days to watch catch-up TV on Freely

You can now scroll back through the past seven days of programmes on Freely to find something to watch.

You can then select the show to watch it immediately, or add it to your My List to watch later.

This tool has been available in Freeview Play for many viewers, but it was missing from Freely when it launched last year.

Freely expects the tool to be popular, citing research showing that almost half of all catch-up TV viewing takes place on the same day as the live broadcast.

You can also scroll forward seven days to see which shows are coming up.

Another new tool, called Never Miss, will suggest shows you might be interested in on Freely's home page. According to Freely these will include "what's coming up, on now, and what's just missed, alongside the biggest and best shows available on demand".

Freely has also announced that it'll soon be available on Philips Ambilight and JVC TVs, and will run the Linux-based Titan operating system (www.titanos.tv).

These sets will be available online and in Currys stores across the UK, with prices yet to be confirmed.

Freely is already available on TVs made by several other manufacturers, including Bush, Hisense, Panasonic and TCL.

We gave Bush's 43UT24SB Freely TV (pictured above) a five-star review in Issue 703 (page 29). Its price of £199 on Argos has since fallen to £179: www.snipca.com/53637.

Have you bought a Freely TV? Let us know: letters@computeractive.co.uk

Only four national parks have 50% full-fibre broadband

Only four of the UK's 15 national parks have full-fibre broadband in at least half of their premises, according to research from Thinkbroadband.

Yorkshire Dales (pictured) is the best connected park, with 57 per cent of premises able to get full-fibre.

Second and third are Bannau Brycheiniog and Northumberland with 54.5 and 53.6 per cent respectively.

Loch Lomond and The Trossachs has the worst coverage, with just 28 per cent.

The figures are much higher for premises that can get 'super-fast' broadband of 30Mbps. Dartmoor tops that list, with 98 per cent of premises, followed by Exmoor and Pembrokeshire Coast with 96.6 and 92.6 per cent respectively.

Bottom is Northumberland with only 62.4 per cent of premises getting a minimum of 30Mbps, despite also having 54.5 per cent able to get full-fibre.

Unsurprisingly, Northumberland also has the highest proportion of premises stuck on speeds under 10Mbps (28.1 per cent), far ahead of the next highest North York Moors (14.8 per cent). See the full list at www.snipca.com/54869.

Do you live in a national park? If so, what's your broadband like? Let us know: letters@computeractive.co.uk

IN BRIEF

SAVE PROTON DRIVE PHOTOS IN ALBUMS

Proton Drive now lets you organise and share photos and videos in folders – which it calls 'albums' (pictured below). Unlike Google Drive, One Drive and iCloud, it protects your files and albums using end-to-end encryption. It's available to all users, including those on the free 5GB plan. Visit Proton's blog for details: www.snipca.com/54866.

iD MOBILE LAUNCHES CUSTOMER 'PERKS'

Mobile network iD Mobile has launched a customer reward scheme promoting discounts on other brands. Called iD Perks, it offers deals for companies including Disney, Booking.com, Morrisons and the AA. Live deals are shown on iD Mobile's app. Read more at www.snipca.com/54867.

NOW BROADBAND PRICES RISE BY £3

Now Broadband is increasing prices by £3 a month from 4 July. Like its parent company Sky, Now never raised prices by inflation so it wasn't affected by Ofcom's recent ban on inflation-based increases during a contract. This means Now customers can cancel without paying a fee within 31 days of being told about the rise. Read more at www.snipca.com/54865.

Will the BBC launch a Freely TV box?

It sees the device as essential before Freeview is switched off

Freely's launch last year was meant to signal a new era in British TV. Here, at last, was a service bringing together live channels and on-demand shows in one place, making it easier to watch without switching between apps or fiddling with multiple remotes. But industry experts and viewers alike were left disappointed when it arrived only on expensive new TVs, not cheaper streaming sticks.

One year on and it's available on nearly half of TVs sold in the UK, including models by Bush, Hisense, Panasonic, Philips, Sharp and Toshiba. But it's still missing from LG, Samsung and Sony TVs, and you need to pay £250 for a decent 43in set. Compare that to the £30-£50 for a streaming stick, and you can see why Freely's appeal remains limited.

Thankfully, leading TV figures understand this and are looking for solutions. In a speech last month in Manchester, BBC Director-General Tim Davie (pictured) said he wanted to "double down on Freely as a universal free service to deliver live TV over broadband".

BBC Director-General Tim Davie is backing a streaming media device that comes with Freely

He added: "And we are considering a streaming media device with Freely capabilities built in, with a radically simplified user interface specifically designed to help those yet to benefit from IP services (read full speech at www.snipca.com/54947)."

By "IP services" Davie means "Internet Protocol TV" – or TV delivered over the internet. This is how millions already watch programmes, whether on smart TVs, streaming sticks or devices that combine the two, like Sky Glass.

To support his case he wants the Government to confirm that existing digital services like Freeview will be switched off in the 2030s. He said an announcement now would provide "certainty" and allow new services to be successful.

The Times has reported that Davie has already discussed his plans with the other public-service broadcasters (ITV, Channel 4 and Channel 5), who would provide access to live streams of their channels and on-demand apps.

In addition, TiVo has said it's making a Freely box, with reports indicating it might be released by Christmas. Davie didn't directly refer to this device, but it seems likely this is what he was suggesting. It would probably have all the terrestrial channels (live and catch-up), plus paid-for services like Netflix and Disney+.

But the problem for Davie is that Freeview remains extremely popular. Around 16 million homes still watch it and Government research predicts that as late as 2040 some 1.5 million homes will still be relying on it as their only source of TV.

The Government is likely to face protests if it announces a digital switch-off. Talking to *The Times*, Dennis Reed, director of campaign group Silver Voices (https://silvervoices.co.uk), said the BBC "has no regard" for the millions of older people who can't afford broadband fast enough to watch TV streamed over the internet.

He said: "The BBC, ITV and Channel 4 and 5 should stick with what they do well – using the reliable and secure terrestrial TV network, where they are kings."

Davie gets this dilemma. In an interview with *The Times* he said that while "many people would be quite happy if their satellite dish or TV aerial was removed tomorrow", many would be "extremely worried" about losing access to their programmes.

Given the BBC's enthusiasm and TiVo's involvement, we'd be surprised if a Freely box doesn't arrive in the next 12 months. But price is key to its success. It's likely to offer fewer apps than rival devices from Amazon, Apple, Google and Roku. If it's not cheaper than all these, it doesn't stand a chance.

THE FACTS

- BBC Director-General Tim Davie said the BBC is planning to launch a TV box with Freely as the main service on it
- Freely has more than 55 channels, but it's currently available only on new TVs, not on a separate streaming device
- Davie also called for the Government to announce a complete switch to internet-based TV in the 2030s, switching off digital services like Freeview and Freesat

Protect your tech

Scams and threats to avoid, plus new security tools

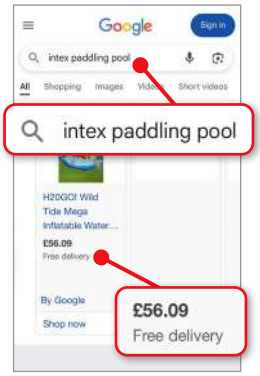
WATCH OUT FOR...

Fake Costco adverts on Google

What's the threat?

Scammers are placing fake adverts for Costco on Google that appear when you search for paddling pools, as spotted by researchers at consumer group Which?. They started to appear in early May, coinciding with unseasonably warm weather.

The adverts appear in searches for 'intex paddling pool', with prices much cheaper than you'd normally have to pay. One advert is for a 'Wild Tide Mega Inflatable Water Slide', priced £56.09 including delivery (see screenshot left). Clicking the advert takes you to a site impersonating Costco. It encourages you to make a purchase with a sale countdown (1 in our screenshot right), and claiming it's running low on stock 2.



How can you stay safe?

Costco sells goods to members for significant discounts, so it's no surprise that scammers would use eye-catching low prices to trick shoppers. But £56 is too cheap even for Costco. It sells a similar water slide, but it costs £270 (www.snipca.com/54863). Note that the URL for the fake Costco site starts with 'ylxxzj.shop' 3 and claims to be based in Berlin. Costco's real site is www.costco.co.uk, so type that straight into your address bar rather than rely on search results. Sign up for its newsletter and you'll get offers direct by email.

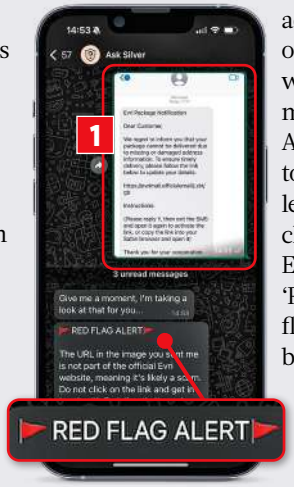
Google told Which? it has taken "enforcement action" against the owner of the fake adverts, though they were still online at the time of writing. It appears to be a well-organised scam, so stay alert all summer.

New tools | Check for scams using WhatsApp

In 2020, a close family member of Alex Somervell's lost £150,000 in a scam. This awful experience inspired him and business partner Jonny Pryn to build Ask Silver, a scam-checking tool that works on WhatsApp. Add photos or screenshots of potential scams and it'll tell you whether it's safe.

To start, visit www.ask-silver.com then click 'Sign up now' and add your name, email address and phone number. Now scan the QR code that appears and Ask Silver will be added to WhatsApp on your phone.

Now tap the paperclip icon at the bottom of Ask Silver's chat page and add the photo or screenshot of the potential scam, whether it's an email, message or online advert. Ask Silver will then use AI to analyse it. In the example left, it has analysed a message claiming to be from courier Evri 1 and judged it to be a 'Red Flag' scam 2. An amber flag means it's suspicious but there's no match in its records, while yellow means it looks safe but you should still be cautious.



It's a handy tool that worked well in our tests. For more protection read Issue 709's 'Block all spam calls' Cover Feature – buy a back issue from www.snipca.com/54822.

ScamWatch
Readers warn readers

'(44) viruses' on iPhone

I was slightly perturbed to receive an email from 'Apple Security' claiming my iPhone had been infected with 44 viruses. But it was so strangely worded that I suspected a scam. As you'll see here (www.snipca.com/54845), it uses the heading 'Your system is heavily damaged by (44) viruses!'. Why would Apple put '44' in brackets? The message used classic scare tactics – saying my 'sim card, photos, data and contacts' would be corrupted if I didn't take action. Well, I didn't take action (except for deleting the email) and my iPhone has continued to work perfectly fine.

Reg Chambers

Warn your fellow readers about scams at letters@computeractive.co.uk

Letters

Tell us what's on your mind

I'm suspicious that tech firms are so keen on passkeys

My heart sank when I read that Microsoft's default for setting up new accounts is passkeys rather than passwords (Issue 710, page 8). I don't think any technological 'advancement' (and I use that word cautiously) has baffled me as much as passkeys. I understand why international spies, CEOs of banks, government officials and hackable celebrities need this extra layer of protection, but it seems like a ridiculous overreaction for the average user. And I'm very average!

Here's my other query: what's in it for the tech companies? When it comes to privacy, they only usually act under great pressure from authorities. But they've been suspiciously keen to introduce passkeys, despite very little pressure from campaigners (as far as I can see). Am I being unfairly cynical?

Roger Buchan

CA SAYS **We understand where Roger is coming from. Yes, passkeys are much more secure than passwords, but tech giants haven't previously been so eager to introduce privacy measures. In fact, they've often fought against them.**

One reason companies are so enthusiastic about passkeys is they reduce how often users have to ask to reset their passwords. This cuts their customer-support costs. It also encourages users to stick with an operating system because their passkeys will be tied to it. This makes switching services even harder than it was before.

Overall, we think the pros of passkeys outweigh the cons. But we think the tech industry has been far too aggressive at forcing them on to users, and done a terrible job of explaining the benefits. We've covered some of the simplest ways to use them, including on the excellent Proton Pass password manager

(pictured above) – see Issue 682, page 38, available on our 2024 Back Issue USB Stick (www.snipca.com/53180).

I nearly fell for 'Martin Lewis investment' scam

Regarding Matthew Walters' ScamWatch warning about the fake arrest of Martin Lewis (Issue 710, page 11), it reminded me that a couple of years ago I almost fell victim to an investment scam, again on Facebook, purporting to be from Martin, promoting the purchase of cryptocurrency. When I rang the mobile number listed it was answered by a very persistent Dutch-sounding male, but I soon realised it was a scam and rang off.

However, within hours and for the next few months, I received dozens of calls a day from mobile-phone numbers. These rang three times and then hung up. I immediately blocked the numbers, which did gradually diminish over time, but still do get the very occasional one. The moral is: don't trust investment advice on any social-media platform, however genuine it might superficially seem.

Pat Kilbane

Public loses in Government's battle with Apple

Chris Hedges misses the point about the privacy battle between Apple and the Government (Letters, Issue 708). There's a third interested party, the most important of the three – the citizens, aka you and me. We risk losing the most from this ill-considered law, because creating backdoors in any security system only helps criminals and catches none.

James Baker of the Open Rights Group has pointed out that UK citizens will be at higher risk of personal data falling into the hands of criminals. And it's not just us Brits – the law apparently is so badly written that it gives the Government powers to snoop into the phones of citizens of any country, something which has already prompted an angry backlash from the US. Other countries will doubtless follow.

The whole idea of crime prevention by creating holes in security is daft in the first place. It's like saying all citizens must leave their back doors open so that the police can enter at will to prevent crime. More burglars will enter than police! It's what you'd expect in a police state, where governments like to have citizens "reminded who's in charge". I don't wish to live in such places, but those who

What's the Issue...?

I'm thinking of buying a smart lock for our holiday home. Didn't you discuss these some time last year?

Ruth Heywood

CA SAYS Yes we did, in Issue 693 (page 60).

I need to buy some external hard drives, but stupidly threw away your Cover Feature explaining which to buy. When was it, and can I still read it somehow?

Kevin Sharpe

CA SAYS It was in Issue 696, and yes you can read it (plus the above feature) on our 2024 Back Issue USB Stick: www.snipca.com/53180.

When did you review Microsoft Flight Simulator 2024?

David Martin

CA SAYS In Issue 701, page 29. Buy a back issue from www.snipca.com/54851.

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hanker after the 'security' of such environments, do have plenty of choice: China, Russia and North Korea to name but a few.

V Kumar

I might take Evri driver to court

Regarding Robert Pearce's complaint about an Evri driver (Consumeractive, Issue 709), I've had two issues with their drivers in the past, while in the latest incident one of them damaged my property. I sent them three emails to complain and they've asked for proof of purchase, but are now ignoring me. Like all big companies they make it hard for you to contact them. That's why on most sites you can never find a direct phone number to speak to a person. It's now reached the stage where I've got Resolver involved (www.resolver.co.uk), and I'm thinking of consulting a lawyer to take the driver to court.

Anthony Martin

Amazon driver drove off without delivering my item

I think Amazon does a cracking job. I can order things one day and have it delivered the next. But I've had one bad experience where I've ordered something expensive and not received it. When I informed Amazon, I was given an immediate refund. Brilliant. But I saw the van pull up outside my house and waited for the driver to deliver. This didn't happen. After a couple of minutes, the van turned round and drove off. Amazon could have been tracking this vehicle and it would have looked like a normal delivery.

I recently ordered another expensive item. I watched the van, nothing was happening. So I hurried out, and when he saw me, he got out of the van looking a bit flustered. I shouted out the code, but he didn't seem too interested until I was right up to him. I can't help thinking that I had possibly prevented another loss. I would have liked to send this message to Amazon, but they make it very difficult to speak to any one. So I thought that your great magazine would be able to publish my experience to your readers and maybe the message will get back to them.

Frank Griffiths

CA SAYS **Frank's right that Amazon's next-day service is usually excellent, and it's great they refunded him so quickly. But his experience highlights a gap in the delivery process that worries us. The tracking apps give you the van's location, but they can't guarantee the package was handed over properly or confirm the driver made the effort to deliver it as expected.**

Our advice is to always use the delivery instructions option in the app. Ask for a signature on high-value items if possible, or request they leave parcels in a safe spot that you specify. If you're at home when the van arrives, step outside and speak to the driver directly. And if you've had any problems involving delivery, email consumeractive@computeractive.co.uk. We'll try our best to help.

STAR LETTER

AI chatbots can never be therapists or friends

When Mark Zuckerberg says that chatbots could replace human therapists (Issue 710, page 7), he paints a terrifying vision of the future. He said that the average American has "fewer than three friends" and needs more. As a Cumbrian born and bred, I can't speak for American levels of friendship, but I'm proud to say I can count at least 20 people as friends.

If it's true that friendship is on the wane, that's very sad. But you'd have to be fanatical about technology to think the solution lies in talking to AI instead. If people feel lonely, talking to a chatbot is surely only likely to increase this.

I've used ChatGPT for basic tasks like compiling letter templates and it does this incredibly well. It's also brilliant at presenting factual information and responding to follow-up questions. But it can't laugh at my jokes, share memories or discuss the fortunes of my football team. People using it must realise it's simply software and can never be a replacement for a friend.

Yet I fear the words of influential people like Zuckerberg will persuade many to seek friendship in chatbots. They need to realise that Zuckerberg doesn't have their best interests at heart. He just wants more people addicted to his sites so they end up sharing more information.

I can easily see a time when Facebook launches its own AI therapists. You'd have to be mad to share any personal details with those.

Chris McIntyre

CA SAYS **We agree that chatbots are no replacement for friends or therapists. In our Cover Feature (page 50) we've tested them on how well they provide factual content, not personal support.**

The **Star Letter** writer wins a **Computeractive** mug!

Windows 11 is like Tesla? Who cares!

Methinks that Martin Howard's 'Star Letter' in Issue 709 ('Why Windows 11's design is better than Windows 10') over-praises the latter. An operating system is simply a tool that enables a user to carry out a series of operations to achieve a goal.

He says Windows 11's "rounded corners and subtle transparent effects" are one of the reasons it's better than its predecessor, then compares using it to driving a Tesla rather than a "Nineties Ford Escort". But this goes too far.

To continue the comparison, would a car with rounded headlights be 'better' than one with non-rounded ones? Or a car with velour seats be 'better' than one with leather upholstery? No. They both do the job required, as do macOS, Linux and previous versions of Windows.

I think my Series III Land Rover is 'better' than a Tesla as it is easier to maintain, can go places that a Tesla can't and is never in danger of failing. Its looks don't matter as it does the job required of it. Same with operating systems.

Alan Brown

Consumeractive

We stand up for your legal rights

My Voxi SIMs have expired – can I get a refund?

LEAD CASE

Q Last summer, I purchased 20 'mobile data only' Voxi SIM cards (pictured below) from an eBay seller. These worked well. I had some cards left over that I wanted to use this year, but they didn't work. Vodafone (which owns Voxi) says its terms make it clear that SIMs are disabled if they're not activated within the first six months. But I wasn't told about this by the eBay seller and I'm now out of pocket by £107. How can I get my money back?

Alan Wood

A Alan should contact the eBay seller and explain the situation. He should point out that the listing had a misleading omission because it didn't state the time limit on activating the cards.

Had he bought the cards after 6 April 2025 he would have used the new Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Act (DMCCA) to seek a refund. But this law doesn't apply retrospectively, so instead he should cite the Unfair Trading Regulations. His rights are the same regardless. Details of when SIM cards must be activated by clearly count as vital information that can influence whether a customer makes the purchase, so withholding this is misleading. It's possible the eBay seller didn't know about the activation deadline, but that's no excuse.

If the eBay seller doesn't issue a refund Alan could threaten to take them to the small claims court, where he could argue the SIMs were not as described nor fit for purpose. Hopefully, it won't come to that. While Vodafone isn't responsible, we've asked whether it could help Alan with a goodwill gesture. We don't think there's much point raising the case with eBay because too much time has passed since purchase.

CASE ONGOING

Does Google have to provide a phone number?

Q I need to ask Google about my Nest subscription, but I can't get through on its UK support line (0808 169 2307). I've also tried its online support several times without success. I thought companies had to provide a working number by law?

Malcolm Lee

A This is a common misconception. Legally, companies must provide an email address (not just an online form) and a physical address (not just a PO box), but not a phone number. We've told Google about the problems with its Nest support line and asked for a response.

Malcolm's existing Nest subscription has ended and he wants to know how much a new one would cost. To save him the hassle of chasing Google, the basic Aware package costs £6 a month (or £60 a year) for 30 days of video history, while Aware Plus costs £12 a month (or £120 a year) for 60 days of history. The latter also provides up to 10 days of continuous video history for compatible wired Nest cameras. For full details and a list of compatible devices visit www.snipca.com/54839.

CASE CLOSED

CASE UPDATE

FTM 2024 finally arrives, but you can still get a refund

MacKiev finally released Family Tree Maker 2024 on 10 May, more than 12 months after it was first announced. It has also published an FAQ web page (www.snipca.com/54832) covering details such as discounted upgrades, USB/DVD versions and system requirements.

If you're one of the many customers frustrated by the delay, you've now got a choice to make. You can still ask the company for a refund, stating that it has breached your contract by taking too long to supply the software you paid for.

Alternatively you can download the software, but before you do make sure you're happy with the tools it contains. In theory, the Consumer Contract Regulations give you up to 14 days in which to reject software you haven't used. But MacKiev (or the retailer you bought it from) might argue that downloading the program counts as using it and therefore refuse a refund.

Incidentally, MacKiev blamed the delay on underestimating how long it would take to build its Connect "workspace", which it claims "makes it easy to enlist your relatives to fact check your tree". It added that its "commitment to never ship a product until it's ready all added up to a much later release than we had planned".

Why is B&Q passing buck for faulty shower?

Q I ordered a Triton shower online from B&Q for £180 and paid to have it installed, only to find it's faulty. B&Q refuses to help me, saying I must deal with Triton under the warranty. My plumber has triple-checked the water feeds so it must be a problem with the shower. Why is B&Q passing the buck?

Charles Smyth

A Like so many retailers we've dealt with in the past, it probably thinks the warranty is the sole responsibility of the manufacturer. This is wrong. If a retailer sells the warranty then it must deal with it directly. If this means it needs to contact the manufacturer for a fix then it must do so. It can't insist you do this.

However, Charles has approached Triton (following B&Q's advice) and it said there could be an inherent fault with the valve. It plans to examine it at Charles' home, and repair it if possible.

Whatever the outcome, Charles must use the Consumer Rights Act when dealing next with B&Q. If the shower can be fixed then the retailer won't have another chance to repair it (or replace it) should it break again. And if it can't be fixed, then it's likely to be inherently faulty and B&Q will have to issue an immediate refund.

In addition, it must pay for any costs to uninstall the faulty shower and install a new one. If Charles doesn't buy another shower from B&Q, it must then refund the original installation costs.

CASE ONGOING

Why has Asus ignored me for 10 days?

Q I paid £699 for a Vivobook S14 laptop (pictured) from the Asus website (www.snipca.com/54837). It seemed to go through without any problems, and Asus emailed me to say it would tell me delivery was due. That was 10 days ago, and I've not received a single message since. It hasn't replied to my emails or phone calls either. Is this acceptable?

Garry Hall

A No it's not, and we'd understand if Garry wanted to cancel the order as a result. To be clear though, under the Consumer Contract Regulations he's allowed to cancel for *any* reason before the laptop is dispatched. However, if Asus isn't responding to Garry's emails or phone calls, he might not trust it to cancel the order.

If it failed to do so and ended up dispatching the laptop, Garry would be allowed to refuse delivery. The courier would then have to return it to Asus.

That said, while it's guilty of poor customer service, it hasn't broken the law by not contacting Garry. Retailers have to give an "estimated" delivery date, but they don't actually have to tell customers when an item is in transit (though many do these days). We'll ask Asus what's happening.

CASE ONGOING

CREDIT WHERE IT'S DUE

I bent motherboard's pins, but Scan still fixed it

I bought a motherboard, processor and RAM from Scan Computers in December. In February, my PC crashed and stopped responding. After testing the power supply I contacted Scan and they asked me to return all three components so they could test them, provided I send them a photo of the processor socket on the motherboard to confirm the pins were intact.

This I did, then accidentally bent some of the socket pins while repackaging the board. I told Scan I'd damaged the board, but they took it back anyway. They confirmed the processor and RAM were working, and despite my idiotic pin-bending, returned the motherboard to ASRock to see if they could help.

After several weeks Scan returned the processor and RAM, along with a replacement motherboard. Fantastic service, when they could easily (and justifiably) have done nothing about the motherboard following my ham-fisted repackaging.

Phil Griffin

Has a company impressed you with its customer service? Please let us know: editor@computeractive.co.uk

Contact
Scan Computers

- **Email/live chat** www.snipca.com/54830
- **Phone** 01204 474747

Grow Your Family Tree

If your ancestors were teachers, follow **Richard Holt's** advice to...

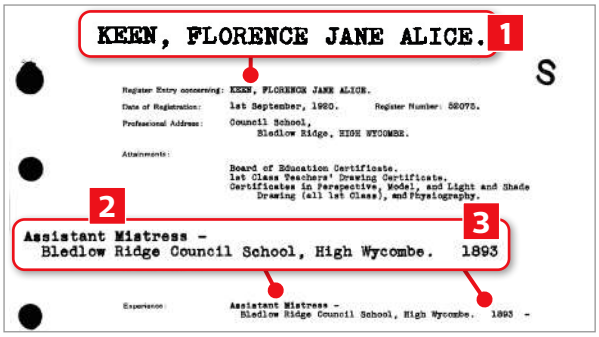
Search school council registers and log books

The 1870 Education Act created a framework for the education of all children between the ages of five and 13 in England and Wales. It also set up local school boards to build and manage schools and for appointing teachers and other members of staff. This was followed in 1902 by the Teachers' Registration Council, which teachers could voluntarily register with between 1914 and 1948.

Browse Registration Council records

Findmypast subscribers can search these registers at www.snipca.com/54800. Type the name of the teacher and narrow the search by adding county, country or keyword. I don't know of any teachers in my own family history, but my grandfather George Castle (1930-2007) spoke fondly of his infant teacher. I remember him telling me that as a child he would go up to her door in the village and say "Knock, Knock, Miss Keen. Sweets please!"

I decided to search for Miss Keen by entering 'Keen' in the surname field and the Buckinghamshire village of 'Bledlow Ridge' as a keyword. This gave one search result that showed 'Miss Keen' was Florence Jane Alice Keen (1 in our screenshot above), and that she was an assistant mistress 2 and had worked at Bledlow Ridge Council School since 1893 3.


KEEN, FLORENCE JANE ALICE. 1
S
Register Entry concerning: KEEN, FLORENCE JANE ALICE.
Date of Registration: 1st September, 1920. Register Number: 58075.
Professional Address: Council School, Bledlow Ridge, HIGH WYCOMBE.
Attainments:
Board of Education Certificate.
1st Class Teachers' Drawing Certificate.
Certificates in Perspective, Model, and Light and Shade Drawing (all 1st Class), and Physiography.
2
Assistant Mistress - Bledlow Ridge Council School, High Wycombe. 1893 3
Experience:
Assistant Mistress - Bledlow Ridge Council School, High Wycombe. 1893 -

Miss Keen was an assistant mistress at Bledlow Ridge Council School, which she joined in 1893

Look through school log books

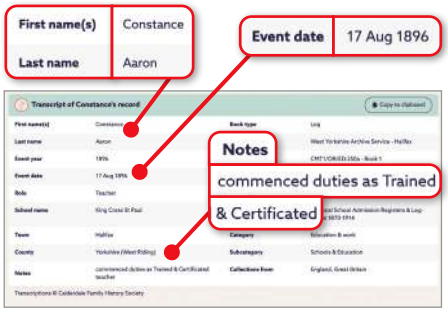
Schools were required to keep log books – many of which have been placed in local archives. Entries in log books were made by the headteacher and can contain details of staff, their status and sometimes their employment history.

The 'National School Admission Registers & Log-Books 1870-1914' collection at Findmypast (www.snipca.com/54801) is the result of a project between multiple archives in England and Wales.

It brings together records, including admission registers and log books, from 41 different counties. To see the schools contained in the collection visit www.snipca.com/54805. Indexes to the records are only available for some schools, whereas for others you are able to view digital images of the log books.

While searching on Findmypast you should filter your results by clicking 'Record type' then selecting Log. You can search by name, but it might also be worthwhile entering keywords such as 'staff', 'teacher' or 'headmistress'.

I searched for Constance Aaron who worked in two different schools in Halifax, Yorkshire, using 'teacher' as a keyword. This gave me 34 results. The indexes showed Constance started duties as a pupil teacher on 25 August 1891, and then as a 'Trained and Certificated' teacher on 17 August 1896 (see screenshot below).



Findmypast's log books show that Constance Aaron qualified as a 'Trained and Certificated' teacher in August 1896

Your Genealogy Problems Solved

My distant cousins William and John Davies served in the Australian army during World War 1. Are there any records online showing details of their service? I don't know any other biographical information about them.

Simon Davies

Look in the National Archives of Australia, which has digital records of World War 1 service. Visit www.snipca.com/54803, then click the RecordSearch button followed by NameSearch at the top. Type the surname in 'Family name' and first names in 'Given names', then select 'All records' in the 'Category of Records' menu – or narrow the search to 'World War I' if it's a common name (as Davies is). However, even restricting results to this war still produced a daunting 186 results for William Davies and 148 for John Davies. It would help if you knew their middle names and service number.

Have a genealogy question for Richard? Email letters@computeractive.co.uk with 'Grow Your Family Tree' in the subject line.

Next issue: Find your ancestors in Google Books

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Best Free Software

Robert Irvine recommends new programs that won't cost you a thing

VIDEO EDITOR

Shotcut 25.05

www.shotcut.org
What you need: Windows 10 or 11

Video-editing software often has a steep learning curve – and a steep price to match. Developers cram their interfaces with so many advanced tools that it's hard to know where to start, when all you want to do is quickly edit a home movie.

Shotcut is one of our favourite free video editors because it's comparatively easy to use yet packs in lots of powerful features. It supports all the main video (and audio) formats, and lets you drag and drop clips to its Timeline without having to import them manually.

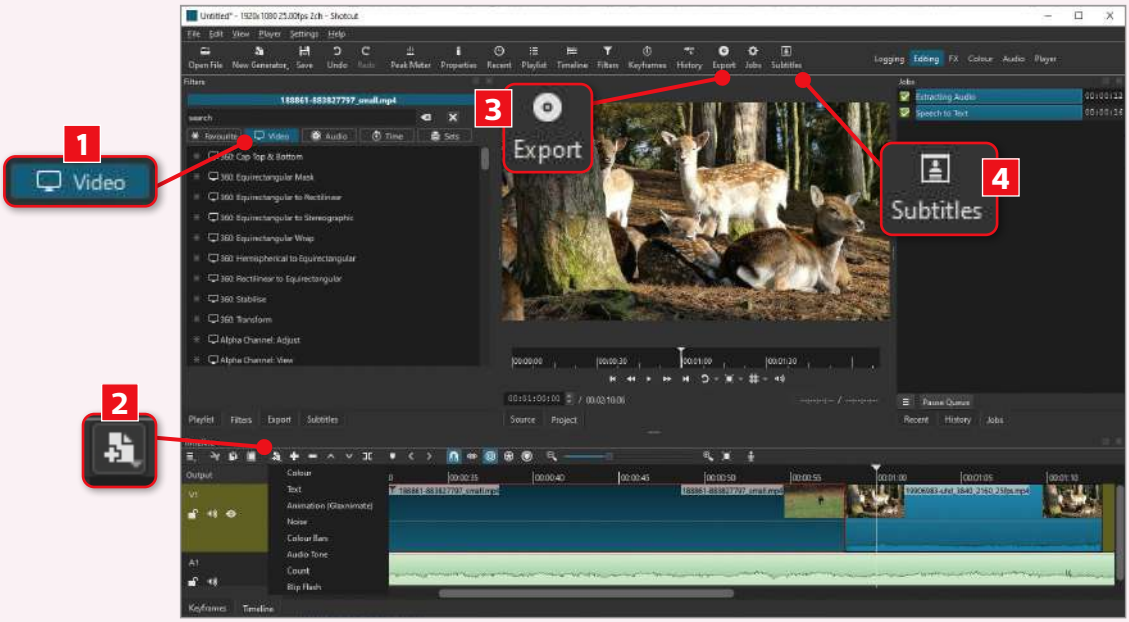
Version 25.05 brings a host of improvements that make editing and enhancing your videos easier than ever. These include a new Freeze Frame option in the Timeline that you can use to draw attention to an important moment or give your video a dramatic ending. Either right-click the clip and choose Freeze Frame or press Ctrl+Shift+H. Drag the handles on the Timeline to adjust how long the freeze frame lasts.

Shotcut has added a New Generator button to the Timeline's toolbar. This lets you quickly insert interesting elements in your videos such as text overlays, noise (which looks like TV interference) and a countdown timer at the start.

There's also a new Alpha Strobe filter, which applies a flashing effect to your videos. You can use it to cut rapidly between two or more clips (see video at www.snipca.com/54932), although this isn't especially comfortable to view and may not be suitable for users with epilepsy.

More useful are the updates to Shotcut's tools for blurring faces and objects in videos, which now do a better job of concealing sensitive details. To use these, click the Filters button then the plus-sign icon. Select 'Sets' and choose from 'Obscure With Blur', 'Obscure With Mosaic' and 'Mask: Apply'.

When you download Shotcut, ignore the link to get its app from the Microsoft Store, because this costs £9.59.



1 Shotcut offers a wide range of filters to apply to your videos. Click the Filters button on the toolbar, then the plus-sign button and the Video tab. Browse the list of filters and click one to apply it to the currently selected clip.

2 The New Generator option on the main toolbar is now also available in Shotcut's Timeline. This makes it easy to change the colour of clips, add text overlays and insert TV-style colour bars, noise and a countdown timer.

3 By default, Shotcut saves your video projects as MP4 files. To use a different format, click the Export button and choose a preset from the list on the left. Options include WMV, DVD, GIF animation and optimised for YouTube.

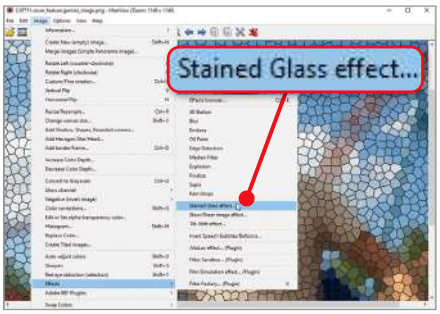
4 As we explained in Issue 698 (page 38), Shotcut can generate subtitles for your videos. Click the Subtitles button then click the three-line icon and choose 'Speech to Text'. Shotcut will then extract and transcribe the audio.

IMAGE VIEWER

IrfanView 4.72

www.snipca.com/54922

What you need: Windows 7, 8.1, 10 or 11



This new version of our favourite free image viewer adds yet more useful tools to IrfanView's already impressive arsenal. These include a new zoom option that instantly expands or shrinks the current image to fit the program window: press Ctrl and the middle mouse button to use it. Another handy addition instantly restores the selected area of an image if you click elsewhere and lose the selection – just click the Edit menu and choose 'Restore last selection'. IrfanView has also augmented its range of effects with a fancy new 'stained glass' option. Click the Image menu, open the Effects sub-menu and select 'Stained Glass effect' (see screenshot) to make a picture look like a church window. Use the slider to adjust the size of the stained-glass blocks.

SYSTEM TOOL

PowerToys 0.91.1

www.snipca.com/54928

What you need: Windows 10 or 11

In Issue 709 (page 60), we called the new Command Palette tool in PowerToys "the biggest improvement to Windows in years". Microsoft clearly agrees because the latest update to the system-utility suite focuses almost exclusively on that tool. The most useful addition lets you open websites in your default browser directly from Command Palette. Press Windows+Alt+Space to launch the tool (or click the Command Palette icon in your system tray) and type a URL in the search box. Press the down-arrow key to navigate to the new 'Open [URL]' command (see screenshot) and press Enter to open the site. Command Palette's file-search command has also been improved to make finding and opening files on your PC much faster. If you have problems launching Command Palette using its keyboard shortcut, click Settings and switch on the new 'Use low-level keyboard hook' option.

£ SHOULD I PAY FOR...?

Choose the right version of software

Hasleo Data Recovery Professional

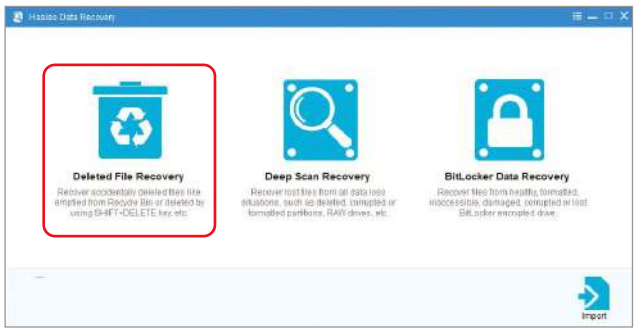
www.snipca.com/54933

Price: £46.42 **Free trial:** Recovery of 20 files

What you need: Windows 7, 8.1, 10 or 11

As big fans of Hasleo Backup Suite Free, we were intrigued to know if the company's Data Recovery program is of the same high quality. Unlike the back-up software, there are several paid-for versions as well as the free option, of which Professional is the cheapest.

Hasleo Data Recovery has a very simple interface with just three options. Deleted File Recovery (see screenshot) finds and restores files you've lost by emptying or bypassing the recycle bin. Select the drive to scan and it will quickly list all files you recently deleted. These are organised according to the folders they were in when they were deleted, and can be filtered by category such as Image, Audio or Video. Right-click an item to preview and recover it.



The Deep Scan Recovery option is considerably more thorough, searching for and rescuing every recoverable file, whether it was lost through deletion or drive corruption. It scans partitions, external drives and USB sticks.

The third option, BitLocker Data Recovery, restores files from encrypted BitLocker drives, but is locked in the Free and Professional editions (you need to upgrade to Ultimate or Technical). Indeed, the only major difference between these versions is that the free one limits you to recovering 2GB of data, while Professional is unlimited. The latter has some extra options, such as creating an emergency disk and free technical support, but they're hardly essential.

OUR VERDICT: Don't pay for it

Unless you regularly lose more than 2GB of data, there's no reason to pay for Hasleo Data Recovery Professional. You can get a free licence by recommending the program on social media (click 'Get License for Free' on the homepage).

What should I download?

We advise you which software and apps to use

What's the best replacement for SyncToy?

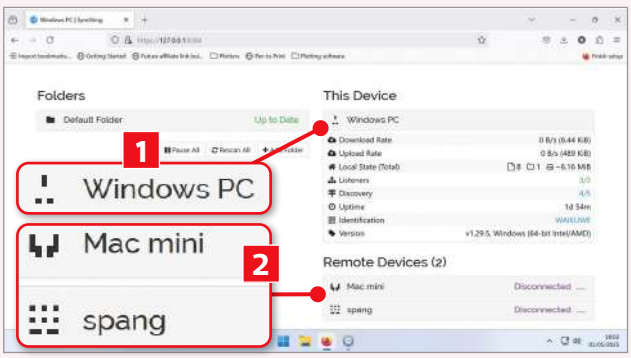
Q **I've been using SyncToy for a number of years to manually back up any changed files after use. As SyncToy is no longer supported I need a simple replacement that I can easily set up for my active folders, so any changes made to the live folders are replicated in a set of backup folders on another drive.**

Don Dransfield

A The similarly named Syncthing (www.syncthing.net) could be what you need. It's available for Windows, macOS and Linux and can be used across all three to sync files between computers. It sets up a dedicated Sync folder on each machine, and they advertise their presence to each other across your local network. When you log into the locally hosted Syncthing web page on any machine, it can see the others and you can link them with a single click. In our screenshot below we've synced a Windows PC 1 with a Mac mini and Linux computer 2.

Once your machines have been given access to these Sync folders, they'll share files in the background without you having to manually copy them from one to the other. Because the files never stray beyond your local network, it will be far more difficult for anyone to intercept while in transit. We've found that for small files the transfer completes almost immediately on home networks, regardless of your broadband speed.

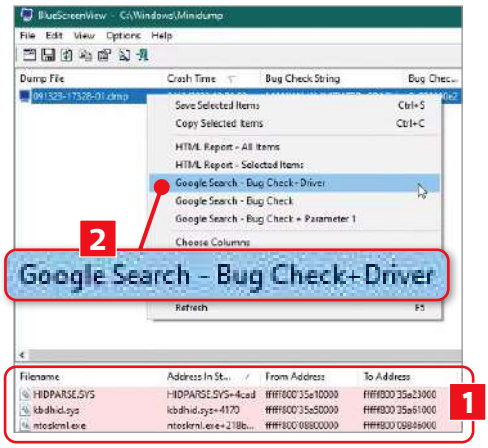
As with all synchronisation tools, it's important to remember that both adding *and* deleting files will affect your other machines. So, if you remove a file from the Sync folder on one machine, it will also be removed from each of the others.



Can I see a list of dump files?

Q **I had to take my unreliable Windows 10 laptop to a repair shop recently. The technician asked whether I had a 'dump' list of my crashes. I had no idea how to compile this. Is there a tool that does the job?**

Robert Black

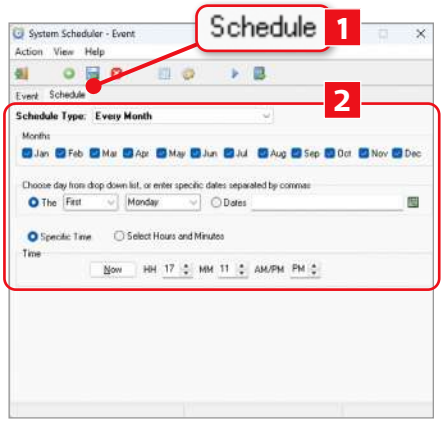


A Try NirSoft's BlueScreenView (www.snipca.com/54741), which shows the date and time of crashes and also the likely cause, such as a driver or program running into problems. Clicking through the entries on the table in the program's upper pane opens the associated record below (1 in our screenshot). Right-click an entry and you can search Google for a solution 2.

Can I easily schedule PC tasks?

Q **I need to schedule about 10 PC tasks every week, but hate using Task Scheduler in Windows. I wonder if you could recommend a simpler option.**

Eric Tanner


Schedule
1
System Scheduler - Event
Action View Help
Event Schedule
2
Schedule Type: Every Month
Months
Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul Aug Sep Oct Nov Dec
Choose day from drop down list, or enter specific dates separated by commas
The First Monday Dates
Specific Time Select Hours and Minutes
Time
Now HH 17 MM 11 AM/PM PM

A Yes, try System Scheduler (free from www.snipca.com/54774). Click the toolbar's green '+' button, then select Run Application from the Event Type menu. Name the task, then click the 'browse folder' button to the right of Application and navigate to the program you want to schedule. If your program needs more information, like a file it needs to load on launch, add this in the Parameters box. Now click the Schedule tab (1 in our screenshot) and set when it should run 2.

Email us your questions at letters@computeractive.co.uk

Named & Shamed

Keumars Afifi-Sabet puts the boot into tech villains, jargon-spouting companies and software trying to trick you

SOFTWARE WARNING!

Wondershare impersonates OpenShot video editor

It's legal for companies to buy sponsored listings in Google search results that appear when you type the name of a rival. It's why when you search for one program you sometimes see several 'sponsored' alternatives first. But what companies *can't* do is mention a rival in their result. Travel firms, for example, regularly pay to appear when you search for rivals, but Booking.com wouldn't be able to impersonate Hotels.com in the listing.

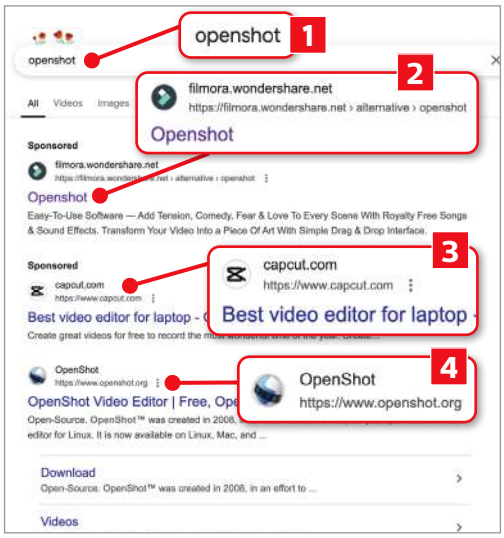
Someone should explain these rules to Wondershare. The Chinese software developer recently paid for its video-editing program Filmora to appear in results for its US competitor OpenShot (1 in our screenshot). Nothing wrong with that. But look closer and you'll see it used 'Openshot' 2 in the result's heading.

If we're being generous we'd say it was human error. Perhaps the person responsible for booking the advert got confused. But maybe it was a deliberate attempt to impersonate OpenShot. And maybe they even thought using a lower-case 's' would get them off the hook.

The company should look at the advert for CapCut 3 to learn how it's done. This video editor is owned by another Chinese firm, ByteDance (which also owns TikTok), and they don't mention OpenShot anywhere. It claims to be the 'best video editor for laptop', which sounds a bit odd and may be unprovable nonsense, but it breaks no rules.

Whatever the truth, Wondershare is benefitting from being associated with OpenShot. It's one of the easiest video editors, offering loads of powerful features in a simple design. And unlike Filmora it's completely free.

In the end I clicked the correct link for OpenShot 4 to download the tool. Next time I'll skip all sponsored results by typing www.openshot.org straight into my address bar. I'm sure it won't make too much of a dent in Google's $348bn annual revenue.



Is Wondershare impersonating its video-editing rival? Looks like an open and shot case to us...

WHAT ARE THEY TALKING ABOUT?

WHAT THEY SAY

OpenAI on how it trains ChatGPT

www.snipca.com/54850

"To post-train models, we take a pre-trained base model, do supervised fine-tuning on a broad set of ideal responses written by humans or existing models, and then run reinforcement learning with reward signals from a variety of sources."

WHAT THEY MEAN

We're not exactly sure how to make AI better, but we can make it sound so complex that nobody will question us.

KEUMARS' VILLAINS OF THE FORTNIGHT

Mohammed Islam and Mahbub Hussain

Credit: Thames Valley Police

These two chaps – Mohammed Islam (left) and Mahbub Hussain – decided to skip the years of training required to become police officers. Instead they appointed themselves as fictional officers Sgt Anthony Matthews and PC Gary Lambert, then phoned people saying a fraudster impersonating a relative had been arrested.

They asked the victims (mostly elderly and vulnerable) to withdraw large sums of money to help with the investigation, urging them not to tell anyone. The pair, both 25, stole £9,000 before the real police caught up with them. Islam, from Dagenham, was jailed for three years, while Hussain, from Whitechapel, was sentenced to two. They'll probably be less keen to impersonate police officers in their new home.

MINI PC | **£709** from Acemagic www.snipca.com/54807

Acemagic F3A

Square deal

The Acemagic F3A arrives with a similar price tag to our current favourite mini PC, the GMKtec NucBox K11 (£700 from www.snipca.com/54341 – see page 32). They are both built around AMD's powerful Ryzen 9 processors, though this newer PC uses the more recent AMD Ryzen 9 HX 370, which has been around for about a year. The Ryzen 9 8945HS in the NucBox K11 is about six months older.

> "Better than rival mini PCs at video editing and playing games"

The two processors are different in other ways. The F3A's HX370 chip has 12 cores rather than eight, giving it more than enough power for demanding tasks. It's also been equipped to help with AI-related tasks, and has a dedicated NPU rated at 50 TOPS, compared with the 8945HS's relatively meagre 16.

In benchmark tests, the F3A was better at graphically intensive tasks, such as running games or processing frames in video-editing software. It's still no match for a desktop PC with a standalone graphics card and struggled somewhat when we moved from 1080p to 4K footage in our video-editing tests. It was a similar story in games, running recent titles *Indiana Jones and the Great Circle* and *Cyberpunk 2077* at reasonable frame rates, but only by keeping the detail settings low and dropping the resolution to 720p. However, given its price we were pleasantly surprised by how well it coped.

The NucBox K11 performed better in everyday Windows work, so if you never dip into more complex software and spend most of your time using office tools and browsers, the slightly cheaper K11 is a better option.

The F3A's processor is supported by 32GB of RAM and a 1TB SSD, which matches the specification of the K11. The F3A is slightly shorter but has a larger footprint. This extra space for air flow helps keep the internal components cool. There's also a fan that kicks in if things get hot, but it produced only a very low hum during testing.

It has plenty of connection options, including two USB 4.0, four USB 3.2 Gen 2, two 2.5Gb LAN ports, one DisplayPort and an HDMI port (all pictured above and below). It can support up to four monitors as the USB 4.0 ports can carry a video signal if required. The PC also supports Wi-Fi 6 and Bluetooth 5.2. The casing is plastic, but feels strong and sturdy.

One unique design feature of the F3A is the coloured LED array around the whole edge of the casing. While this is quite a nice touch, it can get a little bit annoying, and you need to dip into the BIOS in order to switch it off

You shouldn't have to upgrade this for a while, but if you do need to add more RAM or storage, you can access its internals via a single screw on the back. That releases the cover, though you then need to loosen another four screws to move the fan out of the way. The case also has a VESA mount, so you can easily attach it to the back of a compatible monitor, if you'd like to hide it away.

SPECIFICATIONS

Twelve-core AMD Ryzen 9 HX 370 processor • 32GB RAM • AMD Radeon 890M graphics • 1TB SSD • Wi-Fi 6 • Bluetooth 5.2 • 2x 2.5Gb Ethernet ports • 1x HDMI port • 1x DisplayPort • 2x USB 4.0 ports • 4x USB 3.2 ports • Windows 11 Pro • 56x147x147mm (HxWxD) • 1kg • One-year warranty www.snipca.com/54807

VERDICT A close run thing, but this powerful mini PC doesn't have quite enough to topple our current favourite

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE GMKtec NucBox K11 £700 Faster when carrying out everyday Windows jobs, such as office work and web browsing

LAPTOP | **£279** from Argos www.snipca.com/54827

Acer Aspire 3

Cheap thrills

If you're looking for a budget Windows laptop that offers an attractive design and a decent keyboard, then the Acer Aspire 3 could be your best bet. It's worth buying even at its recommend price of £449, but the discounted £279 we found at Argos is outstanding value. We don't know how long it'll stay this cheap though.

> "It's fine for light duties, such as word processing and working on spreadsheets"

Our test unit was fitted with an AMD Ryzen 3 7320U processor, and came with 8GB of RAM and a 256GB SSD. That's about as low-spec as you'd want to go in a Windows laptop, but it's just about sufficient, as long as you're happy doing everyday office tasks and web browsing, rather than gaming and video editing.

On the outside, the laptop belies its price tag with an elegant design – namely a sleek silver case with a black keyboard carved into its centre. The keys are perfectly pleasant to type on and well spaced, but probably require a little more travel and bounce. The 3.2x5.1in touchpad is surprisingly smooth, but it feels too stiff to click, while the clicker itself sounds soft and muffled.

At 1.78kg it's the same weight as our current favourite laptop, the Asus Vivobook 16 Flip (£1,300 from www.snipca.com/54366, see page 30), and only a couple of millimetres thicker at 18.9mm (when closed). It has a standard hinge, though, so only opens to the standard laptop angle, rather than flipping all the way around into tablet mode like the Vivobook 16 Flip.

The 15.6in, 1920x1080-pixel touchscreen has a modest 60Hz refresh rate and is an obvious example of compromise, given it isn't particularly bright or colourful. That's not a huge surprise at this price, but further cements this as a laptop for light duties only. Movies look washed out, while editing video and photos accurately is difficult. For word processing and spreadsheet work, however, it's fine.

The battery lasted just six hours 56 minutes in our test, which is a tad shy of a full working day. That's fine if you're never far from a mains socket, but anyone working out and about for longer periods should probably look elsewhere.

Connectivity is what you'd expect on a laptop at this price – with one USB-C (which supports speeds up to 10Gbps), two USB 3.2, an HDMI port and a headphone socket (all pictured below).

SPECIFICATIONS

Four-core AMD Ryzen 3 7320U processor • 8GB RAM • AMD Radeon 610M graphics • 15.6in 1920x1080-pixel 60Hz TN touchscreen • 256GB SSD • 1x USB-C port • 2x USB 3.2 ports • 1x HDMI port • 1x 3.5mm audio jack • Wi-Fi 6E • Bluetooth • Windows 11 Home • 18.9x363x238mm (HxWxD) • 1.78kg • One-year warranty www.snipca.com/54827

LEFT EDGE

RIGHT EDGE

HOW WE TEST

Computeractive is owned by Future PLC, which employs a team of specialist technical reviewers. You'll often read references to our benchmark testing, which is a method of assessing products using the same criteria. For example, we test the speed of every PC and the battery life of every phone and tablet in exactly the same way. This makes our reviews authoritative, rigorous and accurate.

Future PLC also owns the magazines *PC Pro*, *T3* and *What Hi-Fi*, and the websites Laptop Mag (www.laptopmag.com), TechRadar (www.techradar.com) and Windows Central (www.windowscentral.com). This means we can test thousands of products before choosing the most relevant for *Computeractive*.

FAIR AND IMPARTIAL

Our writers follow strict guidelines to ensure the reviews are fair and impartial. The manufacturer has no involvement in our tests.

OUR AWARDS

We award every product that gets five stars our Buy It! stamp of approval. It means we were extremely impressed by the product, and we think you will be too.

Every product that gets a four-star review is given the Recommended award. We highly recommend these products, although they just fail to meet the high standard of our Buy It! winners.

PRICES

Our reviews contain a link to the best price we found online at the time of press.

VERDICT For everyday tasks this budget laptop is a decent option, but you'll need to avoid strenuous workloads

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE Dell Inspiron 14 Plus £599 More expensive, but Dell's model has a superior screen, battery and performance level

PRINTER | **£127** from Printerland www.snipca.com/54843

Brother HL-L2865DW

Mark my words

The Brother HL-L2865DW is a single-function black-and-white laser printer wrapped in an unassuming grey box that's small and light enough to sit on your desk. You can connect to it using a USB cable (not supplied), Wi-Fi or its Ethernet port. There's not much else to the device, though it has a 250-sheet paper tray; a small display that shows a single line of text; a few buttons that let you access menu options (pictured below); and a handy front-loading second tray for single sheets – useful when printing on thicker card, headed paper or envelopes.

> "A space-saving mono printer that produces crisp text at decent speeds"

It all feels somewhat flimsy and plasticky, and the single-line screen (also pictured below) is quite hard to read, but you shouldn't have to look at it too often. The setup manual is brief because Brother assumes you'll be happy to download the installation software – either on your smartphone or PC. Either option works well and getting the printer going is largely a case of plugging it in, loading a few sheets of paper and installing the toner cartridge, then sitting back as the software connects it to your Wi-Fi network.

Its output speed is impressive, especially when printing on both sides of a sheet. Brother quotes this to be 16 pages per minute (ppm), which we corroborated with our stopwatch. In single-sided mode, it managed 34ppm, which is faster than the 30ppm achieved by HP's LaserJet M209dw (£90 from www.snipca.com/54705, reviewed in Issue 710). It's also surprisingly quiet, so longer printing jobs won't ruin your peace.

In our tests it generally worked reliably, though you should avoid printing double-sided on thicker sheets. It printed fine on one side of heavy 300gsm paper using the single sheet input (which is designed for heavier paper), but automatically turning that paper over always caused a jam. And removing a stuck page is a bit of a fiddle, because you need to lift out the toner cartridge to access it. The weight limit for printing on both sides is a rather thin 105gsm.

The primary task of any mono laser printer is to turn out pages of crisp text, and this printer achieves this consistently. The characters don't look quite as inky black as some rival laser printers, but it's sharp and legible all the same, even with smaller font sizes.

Black-and-white photos aren't printed as sharply as we've seen on similar models, but the black toner is applied very evenly, leaving no tramlines or blocking.

SPECIFICATIONS

A4 laser printer • Uses one toner cartridge (black) • 250-sheet paper capacity • 1200x1200dpi print quality • USB, Ethernet and Wi-Fi connections • 183x356x360mm (HxWxD) • 7.1kg • One-year warranty www.snipca.com/54843

As mentioned earlier, the LCD screen is minimalist, but at least it doesn't just rely on flashing lights to indicate problems, like some. The main paper tray accommodates an ample 250 A4 sheets and the single-sheet front input slot is great for those one-off print jobs.

The cost of replacement toner is very reasonable, especially the high-yield TN2510XL cartridge, which produces around 3,000 pages for £95.90. This works out at around 3.2p per sheet. That's cheaper than most cartridge-based inkjets, but more than an ink-tank printer. The box contains enough toner for 1,200 pages, so you shouldn't need to replace it any time soon.

Unlike inkjets, laser printers don't suffer from blocked nozzles when left unused, so they require less maintenance on the whole, even if you don't print that much. This model uses a replaceable drum unit, however, that needs changing every 15,000 pages and costs £106. This will add an additional 0.7p per page to the running-cost calculation from that point on.

VERDICT An affordable mono laser model that's great for printing text, but rivals produce similar quality for less

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE HP LaserJet M209dw £90 This offers similar features and print quality, but the lower price makes it better value

TABLET | **£329** from Apple www.snipca.com/54887

Apple iPad 11

Keep taking the tablet

Apple's basic iPad has reached its 11th version. It remains immensely popular thanks to its slick iOS interface and an app store packed with iPad-specific versions of everything from games to productivity tools. And – contrary to almost everything else that Apple makes – its price makes it great value for money compared with Android devices with similar specifications.

> "A brilliant screen, more storage, improved performance and punchy speakers"

In line with the last few versions, this model doesn't radically reinvent itself. Instead, it represents a smooth and satisfying evolution. On the outside the design is pretty much the same as the iPad 10. The chassis measures exactly the same, though the screen is slightly larger at 11 inches, instead of 10.9in, though you're unlikely to notice the difference. Overall, the build is clean, straightforward, reasonably thin and lightweight.

With its 2360x1640-pixel resolution and 60Hz refresh rate, the Liquid Retina screen is as brilliant as before, with a marginal increase in brightness levels and colour accuracy in our tests. The bottom line is that this continues to be the best tablet screen available at this price.

On the inside there are several significant changes, though. The storage space of the £329 model has increased from 64GB to 128GB (it also comes with 256GB and 512GB), which is very welcome, because it not only means you can keep more on it but also reduces the amount of time you'll spend managing your storage.

It has Apple's A16 processor, first seen in the iPhone 14 Pro, which is an improvement on the A14 Bionic that came in the iPad 10. This version of the A16 has fewer cores than the iPhone version, but it still ran everything we threw at it without any problems.

We tested it with some word processing in the Google Docs app, web browsing, video-streaming and some casual gaming. Web pages and apps loaded quickly, multi-tasking worked incredibly smoothly, and overall it performed significantly faster than its predecessor.

The iPad 11 is compatible with all the same accessories as the iPad 10, including the Magic Keyboard Folio and the Apple Pencil USB-C.

Battery life is one of the iPad 11's biggest strengths. It lasted 11 hours 25 minutes in our testing, which is better than any other iPad, including more expensive models. It has stereo speakers, two on each side (in landscape orientation), that offer punchy, immersive audio that's clear and well-balanced.

VERDICT Apple has kept the familiar iPad design, beefed up the specifications, but kept the price at an affordable £329

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE Apple iPad Air £599 This is a great upgrade from the basic version if you're looking for a bit more power

SPECIFICATIONS

Four-core Apple A16 processor • 6GB RAM • 11in 2360x1640-pixel resolution 60Hz IPS screen • From 128GB storage • 12-megapixel rear camera • 12-megapixel front camera • Wi-Fi 6 • Bluetooth 5.3 • iPadOS 18 • 180x249x7mm (HxWxD) • 477g • One-year warranty www.snipca.com/54887

CHOOSE THE RIGHT SPECS

2.5Gbps Ethernet

What is it?

Ethernet is the networking standard that carries data over cables in local area networks (LANs) using RJ-45 connectors.

How does it work?

Ethernet carries data signals through fibre-optic cable. The data is packaged up into small chunks called frames, which hold both the data itself and a header. The header contains information about the source and destination devices (to ensure the data goes to the right place), and how the data fits in with other frames so it can be properly reassembled and read by the destination device, even if it doesn't arrive in sequential order.

What are the specs?

The bandwidth of Ethernet has increased significantly over time. Its top speed was 10Mbps at launch in 1983, but the current minimum standard you should look for is 2.5Gbps, though it can go up to 10Gbps. Most new routers now have Ethernet ports that operate at 2.5Gbps, as do new desktop PCs, mini PCs and Ethernet-compatible laptops. Cheaper models may still use 1Gbps Ethernet (usually called Gigabit Ethernet)

Can I change it later?

You can't change the Ethernet port on a router and it will always operate at the same speed that it did on the day you bought it. You can upgrade the Ethernet port on a desktop PC using a PCI expansion card, such as the Ulansen RTL8125B (£22 from www.snipca.com/54890). As with routers, the ports on laptops can't be upgraded directly, but you can add a USB-C to 2.5Gbps Ethernet adapter (such as the pictured model from Ugreen, £19 from www.snipca.com/54891), which lets you bypass the slower port.

PHONE | **£250** from Amazon www.snipca.com/54874

Honor 400 Lite

Rotten Apple

On the outside, the Honor 400 Lite looks a lot like your average premium smartphone, specifically the Apple iPhone 16 Pro Max. However, while that iPhone costs £1,199, the Honor costs a relatively trifling £250. It has a dazzlingly bright and vibrant 6.7in 2412x1080-pixel AMOLED screen, which goes a long way to creating this impression of luxury. Hold it in your hand, however, and you'll realise it's an all-plastic device, despite the metal-effect frame.

On the inside, the 400 Lite has a modest MediaTek Dimensity 7025 Ultra processor, along with 8GB of RAM and 256GB of storage. This chip produced disappointing performance levels in our tests. We'd normally give a phone at this price some leeway, but it actually ran slower than the cheaper Motorola Moto G75 (£229 from www.snipca.com/53561, reviewed in Issue 703). It even feels bogged down when just running Android, giving the impression that everything you do on it takes slightly longer than it should.

Honor has installed Android 15 on the phone, but overlays this with its own MagicOS 9 system. This attempts to emulate iOS, even down to its floating island (Honor calls this the Magic Capsule), which displays information about calls, music playback, timer and more, and provides quick links to widgets.

Sadly, MagicOS fails to achieve the same level of refinement and crams the phone with extra apps you probably won't want – from TikTok to Temu – which is annoying and means you have to go through and delete them all manually.

We were also underwhelmed by the quality of pictures taken by its camera. The main lens takes shots up to 108 megapixels and is competent enough in ideal light situations but the quality drops off as conditions get darker. There's also a five-megapixel ultrawide option, which produces images lacking in detail.

On a more positive note, its large battery is pretty durable. We got through a day of heavy use, measuring four hours 40 minutes of screen time, and still had a 58-per-cent charge at bed time. It should easily go a couple of days, as long as you don't push it too hard.

SPECIFICATIONS

Eight-core MediaTek Dimensity 7025 Ultra processor • 8GB RAM • 256GB storage • 6.7in 120Hz 2412x1080-pixel AMOLED screen • 108-megapixel rear camera • 5-megapixel ultrawide camera • 16-megapixel front-facing camera • Wi-Fi 6 • Bluetooth 5.3 • Android 15 with MagicOS 9 • 161x75x7.3mm (HxWxD) • 171g • One-year warranty www.snipca.com/54874

VERDICT An attractive budget phone with a decent battery life, but performance levels and camera quality are poor

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE

Samsung Galaxy A56 £424

More expensive, but it offers better performance across the board

WHAT SHOULD I BUY? We solve your buying dilemmas

What's the best gaming monitor larger than 27 inches?

Q **Can you recommend a gaming monitor that's larger than 27in? I'm not too fussed about the resolution, as long as it has a refresh rate of 120Hz or more.**

Hefin Davies

A We haven't reviewed any gaming monitors larger than 27in recently, but we've done a bit of research and found a model that we think fits your requirements. It's the AOC Gaming CQ32G4VE (pictured), which is available on Amazon for £169 at www.snipca.com/54879. This 32in model is part of a range from AOC that gets a good value rating from our colleagues at PC Gamer (www.pcgamer.com), with the 27in equivalent winning its award for best budget 1080p monitor.

This larger model has a QHD screen (2560x1440 pixels), so will offer a higher resolution in Windows and still run your games comfortably at 1080p. More importantly for your needs, it has a refresh rate of 180Hz, so as long as your graphics hardware can handle it, games will look incredibly smooth.

And its ratings on Amazon are impressive, with over 20,000 reviews averaging at 4.5 out of 5 stars.

Do you need advice on what you should buy? Email us at letters@computeractive.co.uk

Add a splash of colour

Forge 5070 Ti PC Colour Series

Created to take gaming to a new level. Powered by the revolutionary NVIDIA GeForce RTX 5070 Ti and AMD Ryzen 7 9700X and engineered for enthusiasts. Choose from one of four exclusive colourways and customise to your own spec.

chillblast.com

Chillblast
GAME.CREATE.WIN

BLUETOOTH SPEAKER | **£130** from Argos www.snipca.com/54856

JBL Flip 7

Bass instincts

Computer active BUY IT! ★★★★★

JBL makes a wide range of portable speakers in a variety of shapes and sizes, which are generally excellent quality. The new Flip 7 doesn't buck this trend.

Its cylindrical shape and modest size – 6.9x18.3x7.1mm (HxWxD) – means it fits nicely in the hand and slots conveniently down the side of a backpack or travel bag. It comes with two clip-on straps – one is a carabiner hook for attaching to bags; the other goes round your wrist. These can be switched around using a mechanism similar to a seat belt clip.

The speaker has an IP68 rating, so can survive in most conditions you're likely to encounter, from beach holidays to swimming pools and pottering in the garden during a sudden downpour. Each end is protected by a rubber guard, so it can absorb the odd knock as well.

On top of the unit there are large volume and play/pause buttons that are easy to operate. Above those are a small rubber panel with a bank of extra controls for Bluetooth pairing, power on/off and linking multiple JBL devices, if you have them. The Flip 7 will keep going for an impressive 14 hours on a single charge.

It's sound quality that matters most, however, and we were very impressed. Music sounds gorgeous given its size, from surprisingly deep, rumbling bass to wonderfully subtle detail in more nuanced vocal tracks and guitar solos. This is helped by JBL's new 'AI Sound Boost' technology, which optimises the sonic output without distorting it, resulting in a bigger sound and deeper bass.

SPECIFICATIONS

65W total power output • 14-hour battery life • IP68 ingress protection • Bluetooth 5.4 • USB-C for charging and wired play • 6.9x18.3x7.1mm (HxWxD) • 560g • One-year warranty www.snipca.com/54856

VERDICT A brilliant portable speaker that plays gorgeous audio long into the night, and is built for the great outdoors

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE

Pure Woodland £99

Not quite as good, but adds digital and FM radio to the mix, so you don't have to stream from your smartphone

MOUSE | **£120** from Amazon www.snipca.com/54855

Razer Pro Click V2 Vertical

Wrist in peace

Computer active RECOMMENDED ★★★★

Vertical mice may look unusual to those who aren't familiar with them, but they ensure there's less strain on your wrist. Despite the description, the hand isn't twisted into a fully vertical position as if holding a joystick, but angled at 70-80 degrees from your desktop. The buttons and scroll wheel still sit under the fingers, while the thumb rests on a gentle, supportive curve.

Razer is better known for its gaming accessories, and much of this mouse's design reflects that. The large, circular base lights up with 18 RGB LEDs while Razer's Focus Pro 30K Optical Sensor makes it both responsive and incredibly accurate. The mouse buttons are well- positioned and feel tactile too. It can connect to up to three devices via Bluetooth or USB-C cable, so you have plenty of options.

It can take a little getting used to if it's your first vertical mouse, but once you do, the Pro Click V2 is comfortable to use and we doubt you'll want to go back.

Razer claims battery life is around six months, though having the lights on the whole time will reduce that significantly. You can switch them off using the accompanying software, which offers a range of other customisation options, including ramping up the polling rate and reprogramming the buttons.

The one thing preventing us from awarding full marks is the competition from Logitech. The Lift Vertical (£50 from www.snipca.com/54861) is £70 cheaper and has many of the same features.

SPECIFICATIONS

Razer Focus Pro 30K Optical Sensor • 30,000dpi • 1,000Hz polling rate • 6 programmable buttons • Connects via Bluetooth, USB receiver (included) or USB-C • Rechargeable battery • 88x79x111mm • 150g • Two-year warranty www.snipca.com/54855

VERDICT An impressive, feature-packed ergonomic vertical mouse, but it's pricier than similar rivals

★★★★½

ALTERNATIVE Logitech Lift Vertical Ergonomic Mouse £50

Logitech's wireless vertical mice offers loads of features and is less than half the price

TV-STREAMING STICK | **£40** from Roku www.snipca.com/54904

Roku Streaming Stick Plus

Fit for purpose

Computeractive RECOMMENDED ★★★★

Roku has updated its Streaming Stick Plus – the company's plug-in device launched in 2021 that brings streaming services to a TV set that lacks them or can replace a TV's built-in software if it's not to your liking. It works at resolutions up to 4K, frame rates up to 60fps and costs just £40, though there's also the basic £30 Streaming Stick if you're happy to stick to 1080p resolution. The Roku Express and Express 4K will be discontinued.

> "Now even smaller, so it fits into tighter spaces on the back of your TV"

The design has undergone subtle changes – it's now even smaller so can fit into a tighter space if the back of your TV is busy with cables. It otherwise looks much the same on the outside and still needs to be plugged into an HDMI port on your TV, but can now be powered from a USB port on your TV or via a wall socket using the included cable and an adapter (not supplied).

Along with the device itself you get the remote control, which is more basic than the Bluetooth remote that came with the previous version, but still lets you navigate the Roku interface and quickly access popular services, including Disney+, Netflix and Paramount+. Although the remote isn't as sophisticated, the whole package is half the price of the previous model.

Setup is painless and takes around 10 minutes. We recommend using your smartphone or tablet to scan the onscreen QR code, because it makes the whole process much easier and lets you enter your Wi-Fi password on a device with an onscreen keyboard. You'll then simply need to sign into each of the streaming apps you want to use.

Once installed there's a lot to love about Roku's interface. It's easy to move around and can be customised to suit your needs, letting you put your most-used apps at the top of a long, scrolling list of available services.

You can also access all the usual terrestrial catch-up services, including BBC iPlayer, ITVX, Channel 4 and Channel 5. The interface has had a slight refresh and there's now a new 'What to Watch' section, which lets you dive straight into popular content from across your favourite apps, though if you already own an older Roku Stick this won't be enough to make you want to upgrade.

We paired the Roku Streaming Stick Plus with a Samsung OLED TV, which supports the device's HDR10+ settings. Where available, the HDR image is superb and offers excellent contrast. However, the lack of support for Dolby Vision and Dolby Atmos is disappointing.

SPECIFICATIONS
Up to 4K (3840x2160-pixel) resolution • 60fps • HDR10/10+/HLG • HDMI • USB-C port for power • Wi-Fi 6 • 20x94x11.4mm (HxWxD) • 26g • One-year warranty www.snipca.com/54904

VERDICT A sleek, affordable way to upgrade your TV with your favourite streaming services

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE Google TV Streamer £99 More expensive, but also brings smart-home features and Gemini AI to your TV

DO I REALLY NEED...

A portable outdoor projector?

What is it?

The Yaber T2 Keith Haring Edition (pictured) is a portable projector that's capable of 1080p resolution, has a built-in JBL speaker and a battery that lasts two-and-a half hours. It has a carrying handle and is plastered with art from US pop artist Keith Haring.

What does it do?

It's designed to be used when you're out and about and away from mains power sockets. It can project on to a wall, the side of a caravan or even a tent and lets you stream from Netflix, Amazon Prime Video or YouTube. You can also use it as a Bluetooth speaker.

What's the catch?

You risk annoying everyone else on your campsite and at £430 it's expensive (www.snipca.com/54913).

So can I do without it?

Yes. Your favourite shows and movies will still be waiting for you when you get home.

NEXT ISSUE

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Our pick of products that have won the Buy It award

LAPTOP

Asus Vivobook 16 Flip
£1,300 from www.snipca.com/54366
Tested Issue 708

Versatile device that can be used like a laptop or flipped over like a tablet. It's faster than the Dell Inspiron (below) with office software and web browsing, has a stunning screen, and lasts nearly 14 hours. Worth the money.

ALTERNATIVE Dell Inspiron 14 Plus Comes with 16GB RAM, 512GB SSD and a 14in 2240x1400-pixel screen. Great value. £599 from www.snipca.com/54634

DESKTOP PC

Palicomp AMD Cobra
£400 from www.snipca.com/43515
Tested Issue 643

This fast PC is a mouth-watering bargain, with 16GB of RAM, a 2TB SSD and a six-core processor – though it lacks USB-C ports and built-in Wi-Fi.

ALTERNATIVE Wired2Fire Ultima WS Home Office Workstation Blisteringly fast PC, powered by an overclocked eight-core processor and 1TB SSD. £675 from www.snipca.com/41500

APPLE iPAD

NEW ENTRY

Apple iPad 11
£329 from www.snipca.com/54887
Tested Issue 711

With a faster processor and increased storage (from 64GB to 128GB), the 2025 edition of the iPad is simply stunning. Battery life is over 11 hours, which is better than any other iPad, including more expensive models.

ALTERNATIVE iPad mini 7 The 2024 version of the mini improves the colour accuracy on the 8.3in screen and has a more powerful processor. £499 from www.snipca.com/52573

ANDROID TABLET

Honor MagicPad2
£400 from www.snipca.com/53150
Tested Issue 700

With a larger screen (12.3in) than the Galaxy Tab S9 (below) and a similar performance for less money, Honor's MagicPad2 is a superb new tablet. The OLED screen has a strikingly sharp resolution, and yet battery life is a mighty 18 hours.

ALTERNATIVE Samsung Galaxy Tab S9 Has a much brighter screen than its predecessor, making it ideal for watching TV. Also has a faster processor, speeding up tasks. £649 (128GB) from www.snipca.com/50039

APPLE iPHONE

Apple iPhone 16
£799 from www.snipca.com/53981
Tested Issue 695

This is the best new iPhone for years, boosted by a processor that's as fast as much more expensive models. The screen is excellent, while the new Camera Control button gives lots of ways to take photos.

ALTERNATIVE iPhone 14 Now heavily discounted, this remains a speedy phone with great features and an impressive camera. £499 (128GB) from www.snipca.com/53982

ANDROID PHONE

Samsung Galaxy A56
£424 from www.snipca.com/54585
Tested Issue 709

The successor to Samsung's mid-range A55, this has a stunning screen and lasted over 29 hours in our tests. It's faster than Google's Pixel 7a in all tasks, and has AI-powered photo tools.

ALTERNATIVE Google Pixel 7a Cheaper version of Google's flagship phone, it uses AI to improve photos and lasts 10 hours. Has fast processor and 8GB RAM. £279 from www.snipca.com/53388.

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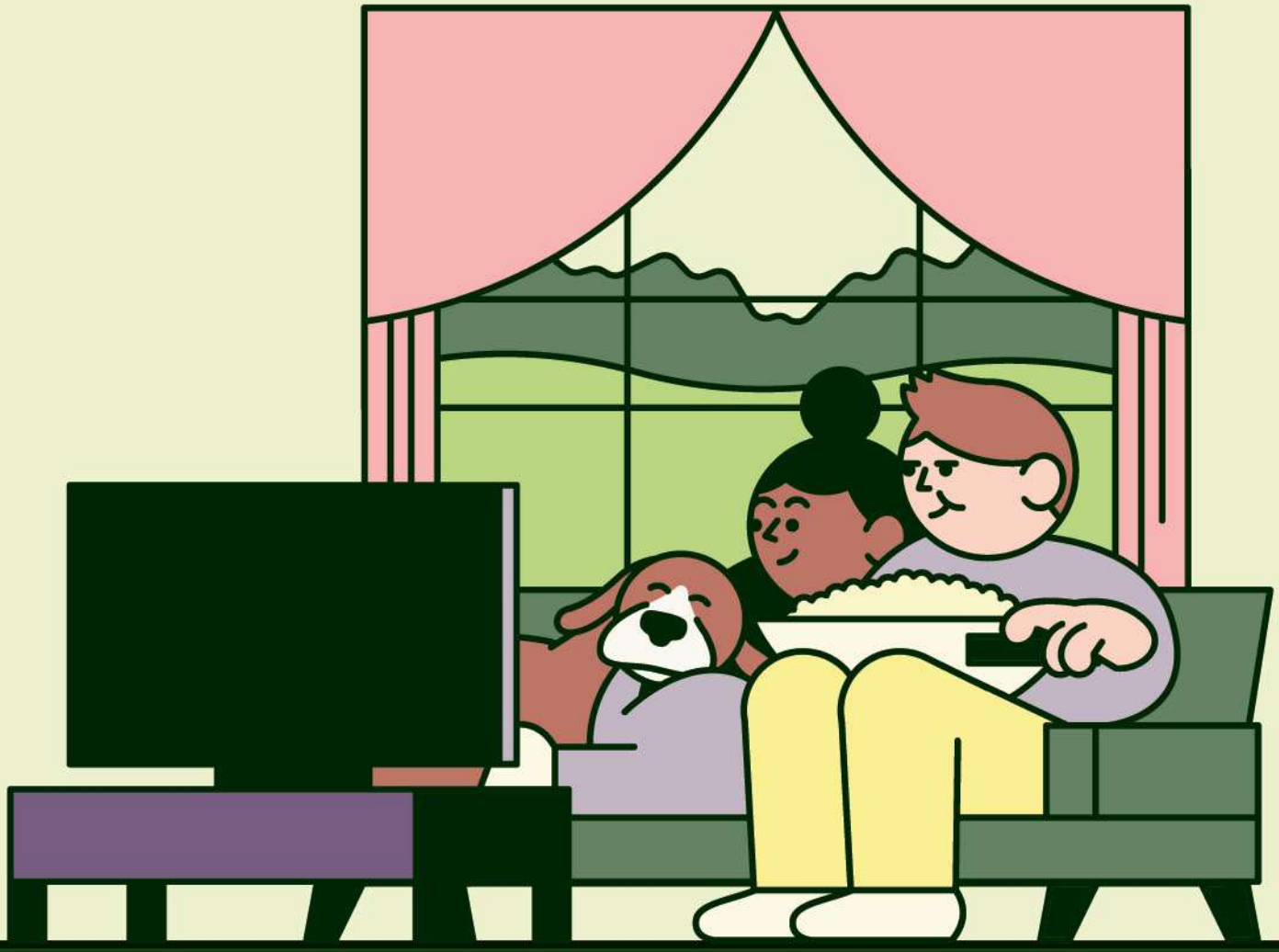

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Buy It

Our pick of products that have won the Buy It award

MINI PC

GMKtec NucBox K11
£700 from www.snipca.com/54341
Tested Issue 707

A fast and powerful machine, but what really sets it apart are the ports letting you upgrade it – such as the OCuLink connection for graphics cards. Also has six USB ports, 32GB RAM (upgradeable to 96GB) and a 1TB SSD.

ALTERNATIVE Geekom A8 Too small to accommodate many ports, but makes up for it with a 2TB SSD and SD card slot for adding storage. £719 from www.snipca.com/51157

EBOOK READER

Amazon Kindle Paperwhite
£160 from www.snipca.com/52730
Tested Issue 698

The sixth version of the Paperwhite has a larger screen (7in), faster page turns and longer battery life (12 weeks – up from 10). Its glare-free finish means you can easily read it in bright sunlight, and its 300ppi resolution makes text a joy to read.

ALTERNATIVE Kobo Libra Kobo's first colour e-reader, with over 4,000 tones to make illustrations and photos leap out. £210 from www.snipca.com/50192

SECURITY SOFTWARE

Norton 360 Deluxe 2025
£14.99 from www.snipca.com/54797
Tested Issue 629

Norton has always performed strongly in our antivirus tests, regularly making the top three. Owned by US firm Gen Digital, it's available at a discount on our Software Store. Use the link above for a three-device, two-year licence at a special discount price. Other versions are available.

ALTERNATIVE Bitdefender Total Security Another top performer that we're offering at a discount. £24.99 from www.snipca.com/41141

WEBCAM

Logitech C925e Business Webcam
£65 from www.snipca.com/50751
Tested Issue 608

Despite the name, this webcam is also great for home users. Its standout feature is automatically adjusting itself to keep your picture looking sharp. It offers a 78-degree field of view, which is fine for everyday video chats with one person in front of the camera.

ALTERNATIVE Creative Live Cam Sync 4K Affordable 4K webcam with high-quality video that can also capture voice from a distance. £45 from www.snipca.com/51577

PC MONITOR

Philips 27E1N1600AE
£200 from www.snipca.com/54190
Tested Issue 692

An affordable 27in monitor with a sharp resolution, impressive image quality and a sturdy build. It has an HDMI port, a USB-C port and two USB 3.0. The hefty base means you can raise and tilt the monitor easily using just one hand.

ALTERNATIVE Asus ROG Strix XG27ACS Another excellent 27in monitor with 1440p resolution and a fast refresh rate aimed at gamers. £229 from www.snipca.com/49898

SOLID-STATE DRIVE

Corsair MP600 Pro LPX 1TB
£80 from www.snipca.com/52658
Tested Issue 630

In our tests, this M.2 SSD hit speeds of 7,364MB/s and 6,870MB/s when reading and writing data – astonishingly fast scores. It's compatible with the new PCIe 4.0 standard, which is twice as fast as PCIe 3.0. The 1TB model costs £81; 2TB costs £141.

ALTERNATIVE Crucial MX500 500GB As fast as an SSD can get in the traditional 2.5in SATA format, this is a great-value upgrade. £55 from www.snipca.com/53808

COMPETITION

Win 1 of 2...

Majority Quadriga 2.1 Internet Radio Music Systems

With a globe of radio stations at your fingertips, Majority's Quadriga 2.1 Internet Radio Music System is your portal to access the top 10 radio stations for every country around the world.

Simply search by continent, country, genre and station name and soon you'll be connecting to over 25,000 radio stations to explore a wide range of topics.

Once you've found your favourite stations, take advantage of the Quadriga's 40 radio presets to save the best of the airwaves.

Connect your Spotify account to directly stream your music library and favourite podcasts, while the CD player lets you enjoy your older music catalogue in exceptional Hi-Res quality. The 120W 2.1 Stereo subwoofer adds deep, resonant bass for an intense listening experience.

To enter this competition, answer the question at www.snipca.com/54773 and submit your details by midnight Tuesday 17 June.

Good luck!

You can buy **Majority's Quadriga 2.1 Internet Radio Music System** for £248 from www.snipca.com/54772. For more Majority products, including DVD players, soundbars, speakers and turntables, visit www.majority.co.uk and 'like' www.facebook.com/MajorityAudio.

PRINTER

HP OfficeJet Pro 9135e
£190 from www.snipca.com/53101
Tested Issue 700

A versatile cartridge printer-scanner for the home office that makes printing jobs quicker and easier than most of its inkjet rivals. Colour prints cost a reasonable 6p per page, while mono costs 2p. Printed text is superb and photos are pretty good too.

ALTERNATIVE Epson EcoTank ET-1810
Not the fastest printer, but comes with enough ink for 4,500 mono and 7,500 colour pages. £140 from www.snipca.com/52191

SMART TV

PRICE DROP

Bush 43UT24SB
£180 from www.snipca.com/53637
Tested Issue 703

It's rare to find a 43in TV this cheap, especially with a superbly bright screen. Sound isn't bad either, and it offers most of the streaming services, including Freely. Its TiVo operating system is very easy to use.

ALTERNATIVE Samsung CU8000
More expensive, but has a 55in LED screen and sharp 4K resolution. Connectivity is good, with three HDMI and two USB ports. £419 from www.snipca.com/52110

ROUTER

Asus RT-AXE7800
£180 from www.snipca.com/52957
Tested Issue 665

This router has Wi-Fi 6E, so will be capable of the fastest possible speeds on the 6GHz network over the next few years. It has five Ethernet ports and also a USB 3.0 port to connect a hard drive or NAS drive.

ALTERNATIVE Synology WRX560
Our previous favourite remains an excellent choice, delivering speeds of up to 791.5Mbps. Add more units to set up mesh Wi-Fi. £212 from www.snipca.com/52051

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HOW TO...

Charge your phones and laptops efficiently

by Nik Rawlinson

What you need: Battery-powered devices **Time required:** Several hours

You've probably noticed that battery-powered devices, from phones to electric vehicles, charge fairly quickly to 80 per cent then slow down. This is a feature, not a glitch, as we'll explain. Most rechargeable batteries use what's known as a lithium-ion core (sometimes written as li-ion), which is a layered structure of gel and solid materials that can accept and hold a charge.

Li-ion batteries are at their most efficient when charged to between 80 and 90 per cent, and not discharged to below 20. Chargers, and the software in phone, tablet and laptops, are mindful of this, so work together during charging to manage a high incoming current until the battery is four-fifths full, before ramping down the power for the final 20 per cent.

This combination of technologies – at either end of the charging cable – is what we're talking about when we discuss battery technology: not just the battery itself. The device inside which a battery lives, the hardware that manages the flow of current, and any associated software or firmware comprise an energy platform in which each part needs to work together.

When you understand this, you can optimise your charging and hopefully help your batteries – and any devices in which they can't be swapped out – to last longer. Here we explain what you need to know.

1 Understand charger ratings

Ideally, you'll only ever use the charger that came with your device, even though it's not always necessary. Legislative bodies like the European Commission have introduced rules forcing manufacturers to use USB-C charging connections for phones, tablets and laptops. The goal is to reduce the amount of electronic waste generated when we upgrade our devices, but there are knock-on benefits for users: not only will we have fewer adapters littering our homes, we can also stop packing half a dozen when we head off on holiday.

Manufacturers are using this legislation to their advantage, with many now including just a cable with devices, rather than a cable and adapter. Their logic is that you'll probably have a compatible adapter already. But what constitutes a compatible adapter when devices are so different? A laptop requires far more energy than a smartphone, after all, so can they really use the same adapter?

The answer is: it depends. You probably wouldn't be able to power a fully flat laptop using a low-powered plug that came with a smartphone, but you may be able to top up its battery – slowly – if it was turned off. So, when buying a new charger always check its Wattage.

This has five volts multiplied by six amps, producing 30 Watts

The total amount of power that a charger can deliver is calculated in Watts (with a capital W because it's named after Scottish inventor James Watt). Often written on the adapter itself, Watts are calculated by multiplying volts by amps. A high number indicates a more powerful adapter. The adapter pictured left is 30 Watts 1. The Output line shows how this is calculated: 5V (volts) by 6A (amps) 2.

The easiest way to think about

adapter ratings is to compare the overall system to water and plumbing. If you've ever bought a pressure washer, you might have considered pressure (pounds per square inch, or PSI), and flow rate (gallons per minute, or GPM) to calculate its overall cleaning power.

Let's imagine we have three washers to choose from, as follows (see Table 1 right).

Washer A has the highest pressure rating, at 6000, so might look like a sensible purchase. However, because it only delivers one gallon of water per minute, it's got the poorest overall cleaning power rating. Washers B and C each have different pressure ratings, with washer C being the highest rated of the two. However, because washer B allows more water to flow per minute they both have the same cleaning power. Functionally, then, there would be nothing to choose between them.

Let's apply that to chargers, where volts stand in for pounds per square inch, amps for gallons per minute, and Watts for overall cleaning power. Without using any figures, here's what the effect would be (see Table 2).

As you can see, to get a high Watt rating you need both a high voltage (strong force pushing the energy) and high amp rating (a large amount of energy flowing). Let's put some numbers into our table so you can see how this affects a charger's rating.

In Table 3, charger A would probably have come with an old phone that didn't support fast charging (which we'll come to in a moment), charger B would be for a tablet or a newer phone (with fast-charging support), and charger C would have come with a laptop.

If you're using modern devices, you should be able to use the most powerful adapter – charger C in this instance – to charge a smartphone despite it having a far higher Watt rating than the phone requires. This is because modern hardware is designed only to draw as much power as it can safely handle, regardless of how much the charger could supply. Let's look at why.

1

	PSI	GPM	Cleaning power
Washer A	6000	1	6000
Washer B	2000	6	12000
Washer C	3000	4	12000

2

	Volts	Amps	Watts
Charger A	High	Low	Not much current (amps) flowing, so charging would be slow. Low Watts rating.
Charger B	High	High	Lots of current because high amps flowing at high speed, so charging would be fast. High Watts rating.
Charger C	Low	High	A lot of current (high amps) but delivered with low force (volts) so total power (Watts) still lower. Low Watts rating.

3

	Volts	Amps	Watts
Charger A	5V	1A	5W
Charger B	9V	2A	18W
Charger C	20V	3A	60W

The PD indicates that this USB-C socket is compatible with USB Power Delivery

2 Look for Power Delivery

Do charger ratings actually matter? Yes and no. We return to the point that if your device came with an adapter, you would be best off using that if you could – especially if you're unsure about compatibility. However, if your device, charger and cable each support USB Power Delivery, it's not so important. Devices that support Power Delivery are often labelled as such (look for the letters PD – as pictured above), but if yours isn't, check the manual or manufacturer's website.

PD is a fast-charging standard that allows the device and charger to communicate directly and agree on the optimal amount of power to transfer. This negotiation allows a single PD charger to safely deliver anywhere from a small trickle (to charge something like Bluetooth earbuds) all the way up to 240 Watts (enough to power high-end laptops or monitors). It can adjust based on the device's needs, so one well-made PD charger can often replace several different ones.

3 Understand charging cycles

Batteries don't last forever. Inside them, you'll find three vital components: a cathode, an anode and electrolyte gel. When you charge one, lithium ions detach from the cathode and move through the gel to the anode. When you use the device, and in the process discharge the battery, the lithium ions move in the opposite direction. Every time they make this journey, they place strain on the battery, which gradually begins to wear out as a layer of what's known as solid electrolyte interphase forms on the anode layer. This makes it more difficult for the lithium ions to move around within the battery. If they can't move so easily, the battery can't charge to its full potential.

Because this layer builds up gradually as you continue to charge and discharge the battery, manufacturers usually state how many "charging cycles" a battery can sustain before its maximum potential capacity drops below 80 per cent. At this point, you might want to replace the battery if possible.

But what, exactly, is a charging cycle? At its simplest, one full charge (to 100 per cent) combined with one full discharge (to zero per cent) constitutes a single cycle. However, because this is electricity, it's not quite that simple. Using half of a full battery, topping it up, and using 50 per cent again the following day also counts as a cycle, as you've used the equivalent of a full charge over the course of two days.

Battery
Battery Health
Battery Health
Normal
This iPhone battery is performing as expected. About Battery & Warranty...
1
Maximum Capacity
95%
This is a measure of battery capacity relative to when it was new. Lower capacity may result in fewer hours of usage between charges.
2
Cycle Count
325
This is the number of times iPhone has used your battery's capacity. Learn more...
Manufacture Date
June 2023
First Use
September 2023

After 325 charging cycles our two-year-old iPhone still has 95 per cent of its capacity

How I charge my devices

I tend to drop my phone on to a charging pad when I go to bed, even if there's sufficient juice left to see me through another day. Considering I have no commute and make very few long journeys, I really need to start charging only when absolutely necessary.

Nik Rawlinson

How do you charge your devices? Please let us know: letters@computeractive.co.uk

4 Check your battery's capacity

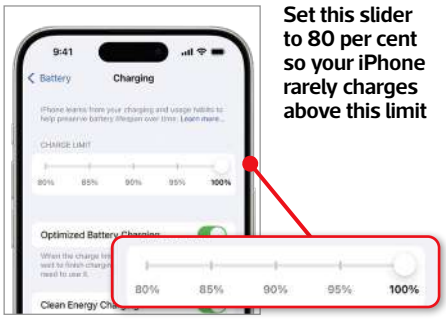
To check your remaining capacity on iOS, open Settings and tap Battery followed by Battery Health, then look at the Maximum Capacity line (1 in our screenshot above). You'll also see how many charging cycles it has made 2.

Install AccuBattery to see battery capacity on Android

The instructions for checking on Android phones varies by model, and there's no exact equivalent of Apple's Battery Health option. Your best best is to install AccuBattery (www.snipca.com/54886), which tracks the battery's capacity and health (see screenshot above left).

5 Extend your battery's life

Now that you know how your battery works, you're probably wondering what you can do to extend its useful life. First, if your battery still has sufficient charge to get you through the rest of the day, avoid the temptation to plug it in. Constantly topping up to 100 per cent will contribute to the cycle count and accelerate your battery's deterioration. Ideally, stop charging when the battery reaches 80 per cent, and charge it again as it approaches 20 per cent.

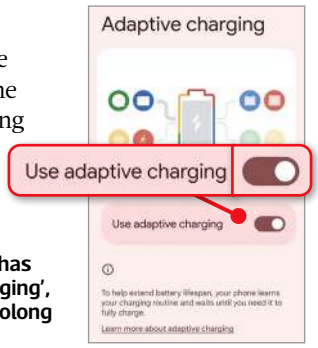


Set this slider to 80 per cent so your iPhone rarely charges above this limit

To make this easier, turn on tools that automate the process. On recent iPhones, open Settings and tap Battery followed by Charging. Drag the slider (pictured above) down to 80 per cent to set the charge limit. Your device will still occasionally charge to 100 per cent, but far less frequently.

On Android, open Settings and tap Battery, followed by 'Use adaptive charging' (see screenshot below) or similar, if your device supports it. Specific features differ between manufacturers, but Google Pixel phones for example will learn how you tend to use it – so that if you're charging overnight it will hold off topping up to maximum until just before you normally start using it each day.

Choose USB Power Delivery chargers if you're replacing existing adapters, and if using an older charger, don't always use fast charging if you have the option to use a slower charger. While fast charging is convenient, it can increase temperatures, which can put strain on the battery. If charging overnight, you may have sufficient time to charge using a lower-wattage charger.



If your phone has 'Adaptive charging', turn it on to prolong its battery life

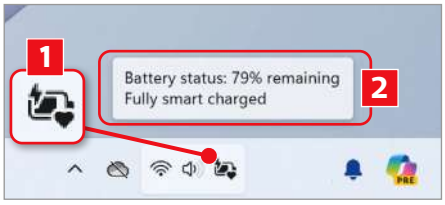
6 Use 'smart charging' on laptops

Much of what we've discussed here applies equally to laptops. They have similar battery technologies, so benefit from being treated the same way, with the battery's charge level regularly sitting between 20 and 80 per cent. Traditionally, therefore, the advice for laptop users who need to work on their device all day long has been not to leave it plugged in the whole time. Instead, they would often be advised to charge up, allow the battery to run down with use, then re-charge.

However, some laptops support smart charging in Windows 11, which automatically prevents the battery from reaching 100 per cent when connected to the mains and in general use. The process for turning it on varies by manufacturer, but in Microsoft Surface laptops it's activated by default and turns on automatically when it "detects your device is plugged in for prolonged periods or used at elevated temperatures".

When it's on, your battery may discharge and limit its maximum charge to 80 per cent. You'll know it's on by a heart symbol on top of the battery icon (1 in our screenshot below). Hover over it and a pop-up will tell you it's 'Fully smart charged' 2 when it's reached the maximum level that smart charging allows.

You can override smart charging by installing Microsoft's Surface app – see www.snipca.com/54888 for details. Check which Surface laptops have smart charging at www.snipca.com/54889.



Windows will show a heart symbol on the battery icon when smart charging is on

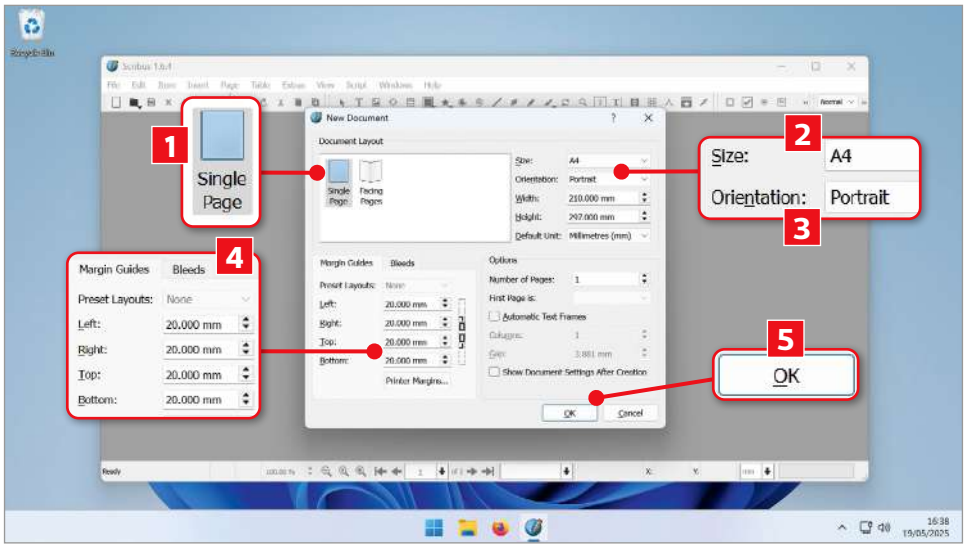
Design a newsletter in Scribus

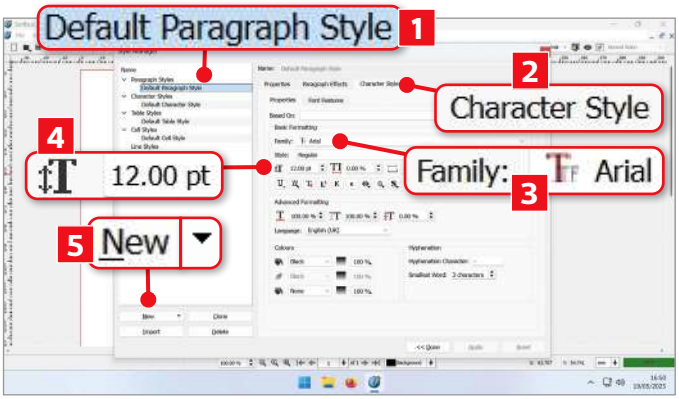
What you need: Scribus
Time required: Two hours

Microsoft has announced that its desktop publishing software Publisher will no longer be supported after October 2026 (www.snipca.com/54914). That's still some way off, but you can prepare for life after Publisher by getting familiar with an alternative such as Scribus. While it differs slightly in some respects, like Publisher you use frames to organise and position text and images, and use styles to define how text looks on the page. In other words, a lot of what you've already learned still applies. Here, we'll show you how to get started with Scribus by using it to design a newsletter. Download it for free from www.scribus.net.

STEP 1

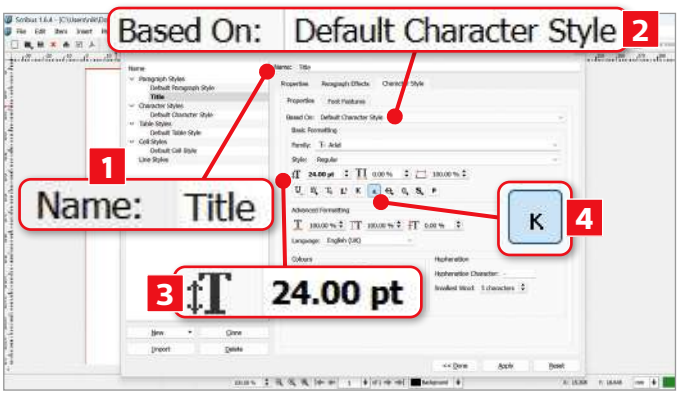
When you open Scribus, you need to tell it what kind of document you want to produce. Here, we're going to create a club newsletter, so leave Single Page 1 selected and check that the document size and orientation are A4 2 and Portrait 3. Change the Margin Guides to 20mm 4 to give the contents some breathing space. This will also make sure that even if you send out the newsletter as a PDF it should easily fit any printer parameters should one of your recipients decide to print it. Click OK 5.





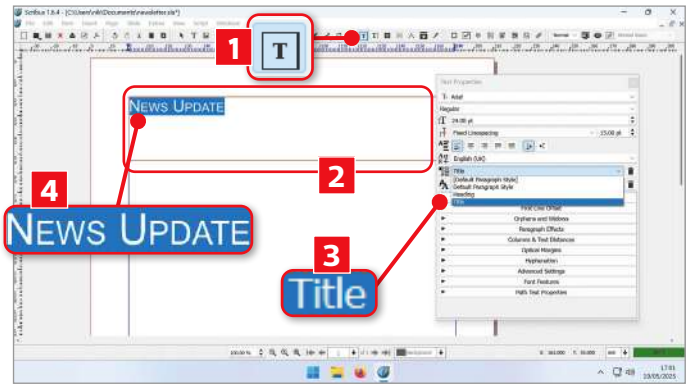
STEP 2

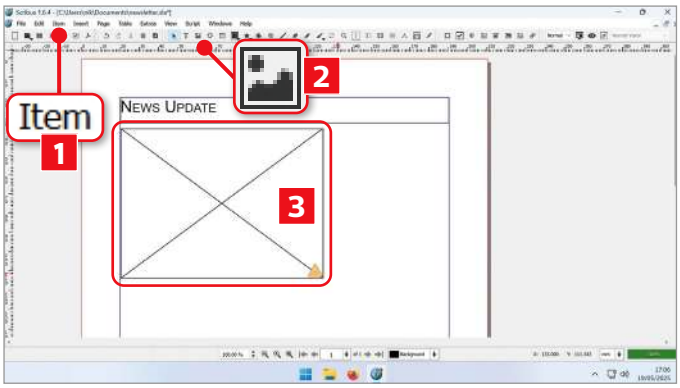
You now need to define your text styles. Press F4 to open the Style Manager window, then double-click Default Paragraph Style 1 and switch to the Character Style tab 2. In the Basic Formatting box, you'll see that any text we add to the page is currently set to use Arial font 3 at 12pt size 4 – to change either, use the dropdown menus next to them. Any setting you make here will apply to your document. Now click New 5 to create your Title style.



STEP 3

Click Paragraph Styles in the left-hand menu. Type Title into the Name box 1, then in the Based On dropdown menu select Default Character Style 2. This ensures any changes you make, such as changing the font, will also be reflected in the Heading style (see Step 4) unless you've specifically overruled them. Set the size to 24pt 3 and turn on Small Caps 4. As you can see, the 24pt setting is bold, indicating it's been overruled, so if you change the size of the Default Paragraph Style, the 24pt Title style won't change.

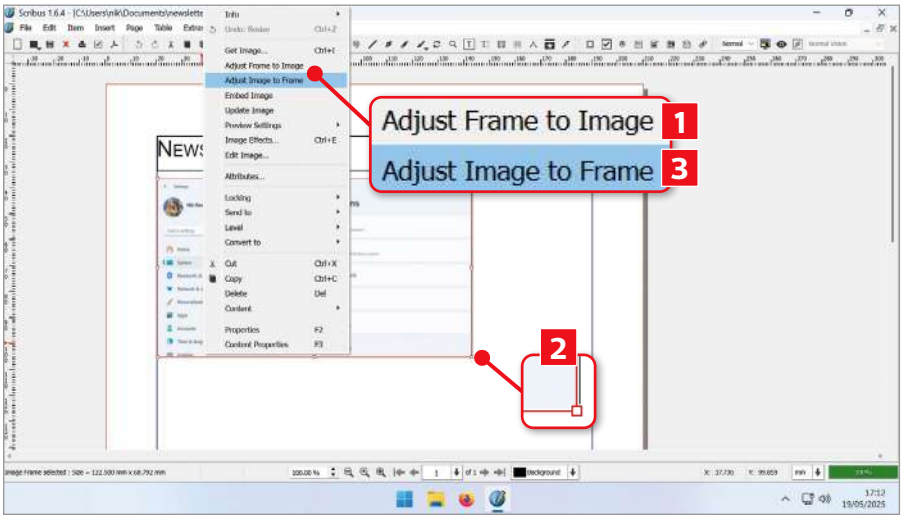


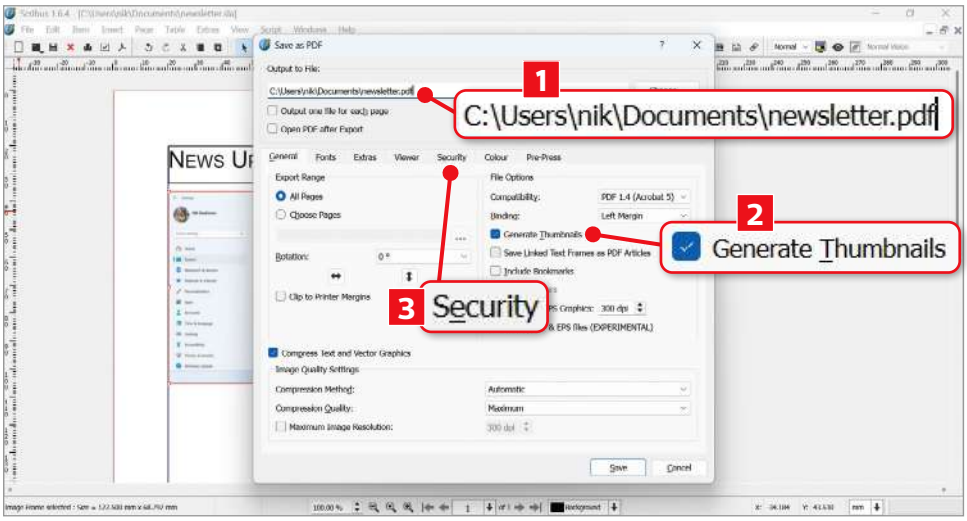


STEP 4 Next, click New again, call your third style Heading, base it on Default Character Style, and set the font size to 16pt. This style will be used for any sub-headings within your text. Click Apply to save your new styles, then close the Style Manager. Now click the text frame tool 1, then click and hold on the page and drag out a box into which you'll type your heading 2. Press Ctrl+A to select all of the text, then press F3 to open the Text Properties box. Select Title 3 in the Paragraph style menu and the title will adopt the settings you defined earlier 4.

STEP 5 Our text frame is much too big for its contents. To quickly tidy things up, click Item 1, then hover over Adjust and click 'Adjust Frame Height to Text'. Now let's add an image. Click the Image Frame tool 2, then click on the page and hold down your mouse button while dragging out an image frame 3. Release the button when it's roughly the size you need (you'll perfect it in Step 6). Press Ctrl+I to import an image, then navigate to and select the image you want. It will be dropped into the box.

STEP 6 Because we didn't know the proportions or size of the image beforehand, it doesn't fit in our image frame. Right-click the image and select 'Adjust Frame to Image' 1 to resize the picture frame so it accommodates the image entirely. Now, click on the grab handle in the bottom-right corner 2 and hold your Ctrl key while resizing the frame until you're happy with it. This maintains the proportions you just set. Finally, right-click the image again and select 'Adjust Image to Frame' 3 to set it to neatly fit your newly resized holder.





STEP 7 Continue adding text and images until you have completed your newsletter, saving regularly as you go. Press Ctrl+P to print in the usual way, or Ctrl+Shift+P to save it as a PDF. If saving as a PDF, give the document a relevant name 1, then tick the box next to 'Generate Thumbnails' 2 so they appear in the PDF reader sidebar to help recipients navigate the pages. If you want to password-protect the resulting file, click Security 3, then tick the box beside Use Encryption and set a password. Finally, click Save.

Readers' Tips

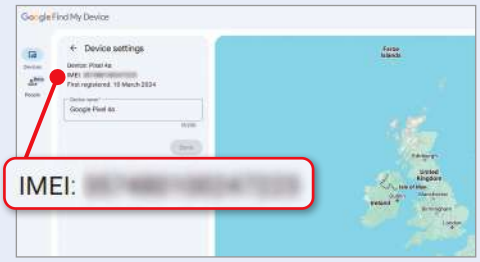
TIP OF THE FORTNIGHT

Find your IMEI without accessing your phone

One thing you didn't mention in your otherwise informative feature on preventing phone theft (Issue 708, page 60) is that you can discover your phone's IMEI without having physical access to it.

If your phone is an Android model, you should visit Google's Find My Device page (www.snipca.com/54798), then click the cog icon. You'll see the IMEI listed under 'Device settings' (see screenshot). You can also do this with iPhones, as long as you previously registered it. Sign into the Apple ID site (https://account.apple.com) and click Devices. But you'll need to type a code that gets sent to another trusted device.

Don't forget that the IMEI is printed on the box the phone came in, usually near the barcode. Also, sometimes the retailer will include the IMEI in emails sent after you purchase the phone. Another useful tip is to check you've got the correct IMEI by typing it into www.imei.info.



James Parsons

James wins a copy of our 2024 Back Issue CD **Buy it from us at www.snipca.com/53433**

HARDWARE

Protect your video doorbell from rain and sun

I use the Ring Battery Video Doorbell Plus (£130 from www.snipca.com/54318), which you awarded Bronze in Issue 707's Cover Feature on video doorbells. I like my Ring, but viewing the footage on my phone was tricky sometimes because of rain and sun glare.

My solution was to buy a 'weather protector' (£14 from www.snipca.com/54708, pictured below left), which is a plastic case you can slip the doorbell into. When I opened the package I thought it would be too flimsy, but the weight of the Ring unit adds sturdiness. It acts like both an umbrella (keeping it dry) and a visor (shielding it from the sun's brightness).

Paul Rose

HARDWARE

Connect PCs to a monitor using an HDMI switch

In Issue 709's Problems Solved (page 68), Mick Miller asked whether he could connect two PCs to an old monitor. I was in a similar position. I had to transfer stuff from my present computer to a 'new' one (actually

Why I stopped using...

Windows Quick Assist

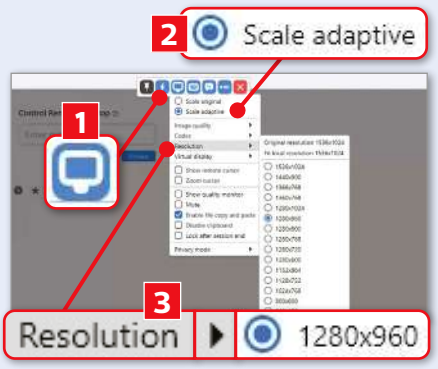
Your news story about scammers gaining access to victims' computers using Quick Assist in Windows (Issue 709, page 8) was the jolt I needed to try something different.

And what I use instead...

You mentioned that scammers also use AnyDesk and TeamViewer to infiltrate computers, so I rejected those. Then I remembered you recently recommended **RustDesk** (Issue 695, page 35, https://rustdesk.com) as an alternative to TeamViewer, so I gave it a go. It's not as well known, so I assume scammers haven't picked up on it.

Using your instructions I found it easy to install and set up. The most useful tip you gave was to change the screen resolution if the computer you're connecting to has a higher one. Click the Display icon (1 in our screenshot), then select 'Scale adaptive' 2 and the screen you're connected to will neatly fit yours. You can also click the Resolution submenu to tweak the resolution 3.

I also love that RustDesk is open-source, so you don't have to worry that your favourite feature is suddenly going to become paid-for. TeamViewer has been guilty of that in the past.



Michael Smith

Tell us why you stopped using a website, app or program: letters@computeractive.co.uk

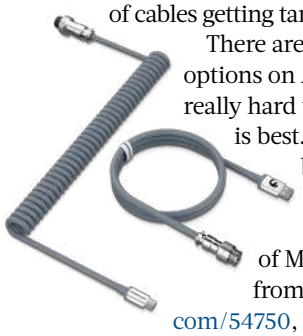
refurbished to help the planet and my wallet), but only had one monitor. If both Mick's computers have HDMI output, I can heartily recommend this HDMI switch from Anker (£16 from www.snipca.com/54777, pictured below left). It's so easy to use – just press a button. But be aware there's a slight delay and you'll see a momentary black screen when switching. It doesn't require any external power.

Geoff Miles

HARDWARE

Buy coiled cables to avoid tangles

In Issue 699's Cover Feature you urged us to ditch our cables for 2025. I've taken some of your advice by ditching conventional cables and buying coiled ones. I finally got fed up with years of cables getting tangled and twisted.



There are hundreds of options on Amazon, and it's really hard to know which is best. In the end I bought a cable with the slightly ridiculous name of Mamba Snake (£13 from www.snipca.com/54750, pictured left), but it has worked brilliantly. It comes in loads of colours, but I've chosen a tasteful grey. It's USB-A at one end to connect to your PC, and USB-C at the other to plug into your keyboard.

Mark Sinclair

SOFTWARE

Jump to image edits using History panel

I agree with your assessment in Issue 709 (page 18) that Photo Variants (www.snipca.com/54636) is easier to use than GIMP. In fact, I don't think any photo editor I've ever used has been as simple to master. Perhaps it doesn't have enough advanced tools to satisfy serious editors, but I love it. The handiest tool is the History panel at the bottom left (see screenshot below left). Just click one of the changes you've made to see it and you can then resume editing.

Ted Alderman

APP

Browse city guides on Polarsteps

I haven't used Polarsteps (www.polarsteps.com) to keep track of my travels, as you suggested in your feature on Google's changes to Timeline (Issue 710, page 62). But I have used it as a guide when visiting cities for the first time. It's so easy. Tap 'Guides' at the bottom then type a location. You'll then see loads of locations on a map (1 in our screenshot below), and buttons at the bottom for accommodation, restaurants and places to visit 2. In my experience the reviews have proved very accurate.

Jon Haslam

OFFICES

Cross out cells in Excel

Issue 710's 'In the Club' (page 48) about locking and unlocking specific cells in Excel spreadsheets reminded me of another way I use the Format Cells option – which is to cross out cells to indicate when a club member has paid.

First, I select the cells then open Format Cells using the keyboard shortcut you mentioned (Ctrl+1). But instead of the Protection tab I click Border (1 in our screenshot below) then choose a colour (normally red) and line width 2. I then click the cross-through icon 3, which is confirmed in the box on the left 4. Clicking OK adds the line diagonally through the cells I had selected 5.

Pat Hamilton

Reader recommends...

Bose SoundLink Flex

£149 from www.snipca.com/53294

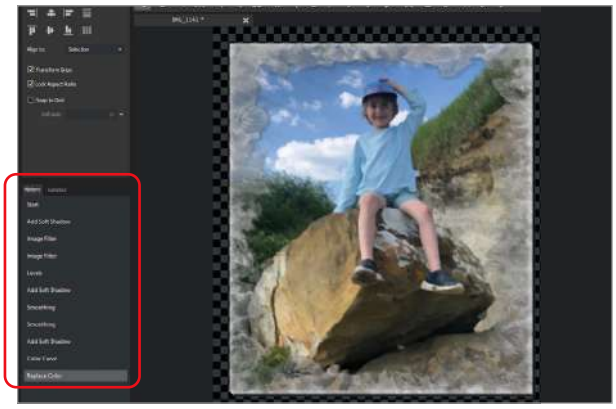
I recently had to organise a small garden party that required gentle music in the background. I needed a decent Bluetooth speaker that would connect to the playlist on my Oppo Android phone. Flicking through reviews in recent issues, the most suitable speaker seemed to be the Bose SoundLink Flex (Issue 701, page 28).

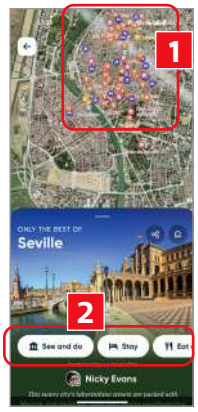
I was worried beforehand that the music would be too loud, but it was easy to set the perfect volume using the app. It sounded clear and carried much further than I was expecting. It lasted for the whole party (about five hours) on a single charge, and since then I've used it around the house without having to power it very often.

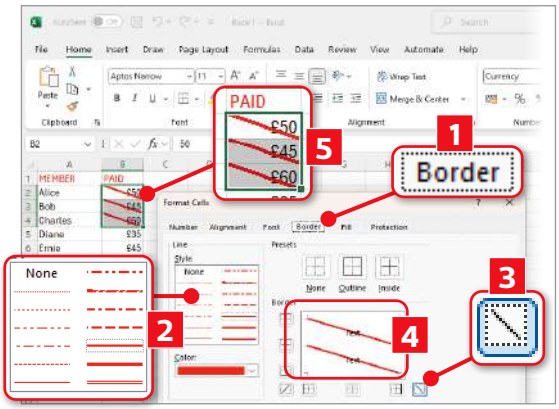
The only downside is that the £109 price I bought it for (and which you listed in your review) doesn't seem to exist anymore. The cheapest price I saw when I last checked was £149 on Amazon. I think Bose sells a refurbished model for £100 (www.snipca.com/54790), but I don't know whether it's exactly the same model.

Martin Lawson

Want to recommend hardware or software to fellow readers?
Email letters@computeractive.co.uk







EDGE

Find and install extensions more easily

Microsoft has redesigned the Edge Add-ons Store (www.snipca.com/54799) with a more modern look that makes it easier to find and install new extensions. As well as browsing categories such as Photos, 'Search tools' and Shopping, you can now explore themed collections of add-ons from the store's home page.

These include 'Ad blocking', 'Secure browsing' and 'AI-powered extensions', in addition to the most popular Edge extensions. Themes for the browser have been similarly grouped into logical categories and collections.

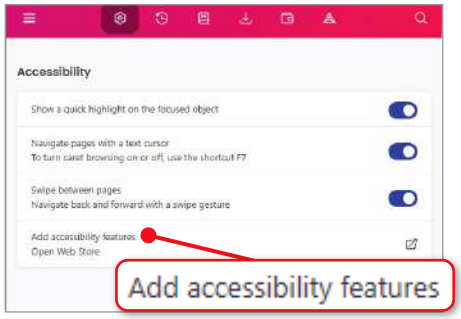
The store's search tool has also been improved to autosuggest extensions as you type. The top suggestions have a handy Get button you can click (see screenshot below) to install them instantly.

BRAVE

Switch on accessibility tools

Brave has added an Accessibility page to its Settings that provides several options for making web pages easier to navigate. To access it, either click the browser's three-line menu and choose Settings then Accessibility, or go straight to brave://settings/accessibility.

The Accessibility options include 'Show a quick highlight on the focused object', which makes page elements such as links clearer to see; and 'Navigate pages with a text cursor', which lets you use caret browsing to browse using your cursor keys. To install accessibility extensions in Brave from the Chrome Web Store, select 'Add accessibility features' (see screenshot below left).


Accessibility
Show a quick highlight on the focused object
Navigate pages with a text cursor
To turn caret browsing on or off, use the shortcut F7
Swipe between pages
Navigate back and forward with a swipe gesture
Add accessibility features
Open Web Store
Add accessibility features

FIREFOX

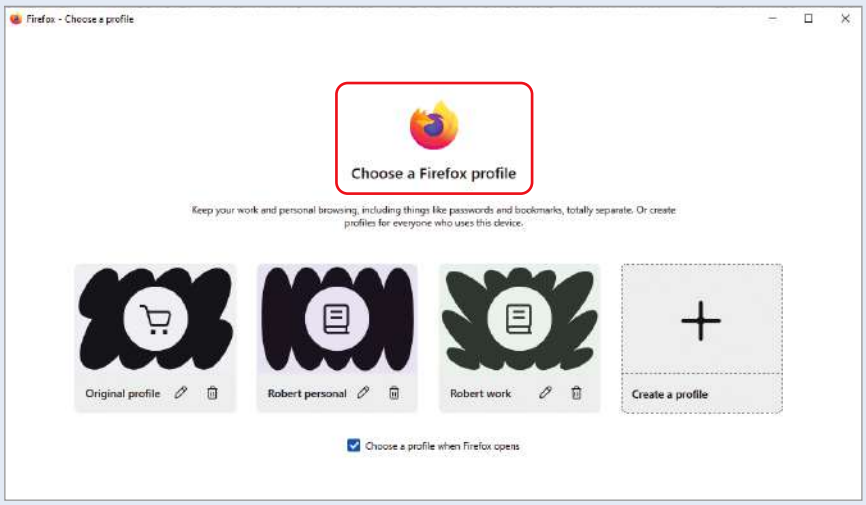
Create separate profiles for each user

Firefox 138, released at the end of April, finally brings profile management to the browser. This lets you create separate profiles for different purposes (such as 'personal' and 'work') or for each Firefox user on your computer.

To create a profile, click the browser's three-line menu button and select Profiles, then 'New profile' to open a new Firefox window. Choose a name, theme and avatar for your profile, and click 'Done editing'. Any tabs you open, bookmarks you add and extensions you install will be separate from your original browser profile.

The next time you launch Firefox, you'll be prompted to choose which profile to use (see screenshot). Switch between profiles and add further ones by clicking the menu button and selecting the current profile name. Click 'Manage profiles' to edit or delete a profile.

If you don't see the Profiles feature, type about:config in the address bar, press Enter and click 'Accept the Risk and Continue'. Find the preference browser.profiles.enabled and double-click it to change its value to 'true'.


Firefox - Choose a profile
Choose a Firefox profile
Keep your work and personal browsing, including things like passwords and bookmarks, totally separate. Or create profiles for everyone who uses this device.
Original profile
Robert personal
Robert work
Create a profile
Choose a profile when Firefox opens

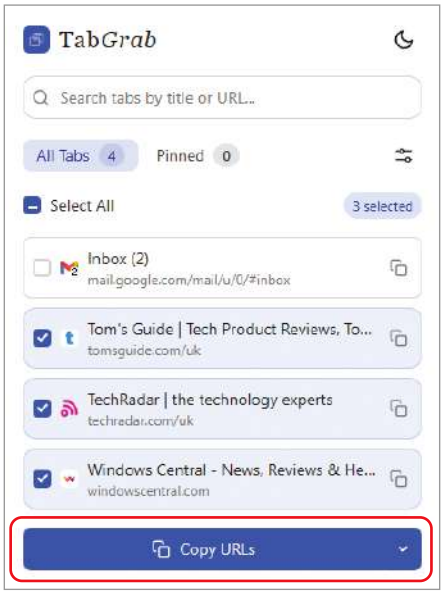
CHROMIUM

Copy URLs from multiple tabs

To copy the URL of a web page so you can paste it in an email, document or social-media post, you simply right-click it in the address bar and choose Copy. But what if you need to copy the URLs of several pages?

A new extension called Tab Grab (www.snipca.com/54804) provides a solution by listing all your open tabs and letting you copy multiple URLs in one go. Just tick the boxes next to their names and click Copy URLs (see screenshot right). Alternatively, click Select All to copy all the web addresses to your clipboard.

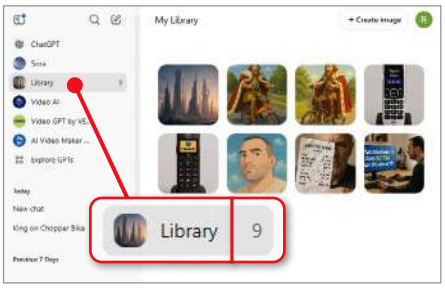
Tab Grab may prompt an Enhanced Safe Browsing warning, but it's safe to use so just click 'Continue to install'.



CHATGPT

View a library of your AI-generated images

OpenAI has made it much easier to find, view and edit the images you create in ChatGPT. Previously, you had to go back into the original chats to see the images you'd generated, but you can now browse them all in a dedicated Library section.



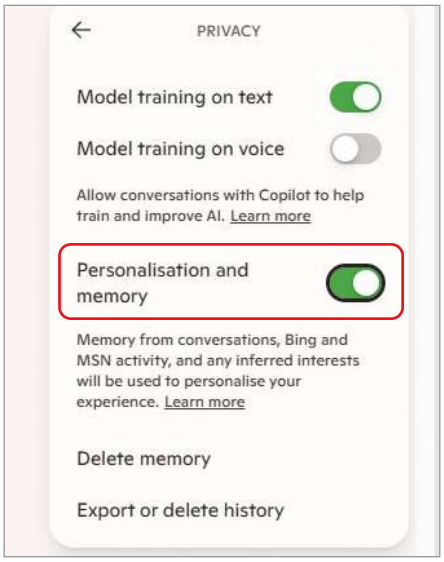
This new Library option is available in the left-hand menu on the ChatGPT website (see screenshot above) and in its mobile apps – tap the menu button in the top-left corner to open the menu. The Library displays your AI-generated images chronologically, and gives them titles based on their content.

Select an image to open an enlarged version and click or tap the arrow button to download it. Click 'Edit image' or tap Edit to ask ChatGPT to adjust the picture, by describing the changes you want to make. You can also create new images directly from the Library.

COPILOT

Personalise your conversations

Microsoft has added a 'memory' feature to Copilot, which – as with the similar options in ChatGPT and Gemini – allows the chatbot to remember your conversations. This means it can personalise its responses, based on questions you've previously asked and information you've provided, to make them more relevant to you.


PRIVACY
Model training on text
Model training on voice
Allow conversations with Copilot to help train and improve AI. Learn more
Personalisation and memory
Memory from conversations, Bing and MSN activity, and any inferred interests will be used to personalise your experience. Learn more
Delete memory
Export or delete history

The new memory setting is disabled by default, so it won't save data to personalise your chats without your permission. To turn it on, click or tap your profile picture to open your Account settings. Select Privacy and switch on 'Personalisation and memory' (see screenshot left).

You can delete your memory to make Copilot forget everything you've told it.

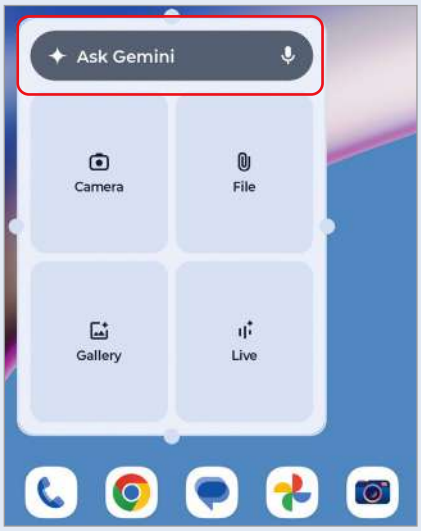
GEMINI

Access features from your phone or tablet's home screen

You no longer need to open the Gemini app every time you want to interact with the chatbot on your phone or tablet. Google has introduced a widget that lets you access Gemini's features directly from your home screen.

Available on both Android and iOS, the new Gemini widget includes a message box and four shortcuts. Tap the camera option to take a photo for Gemini to analyse; tap the File and Gallery options to upload files and images; and tap the Live option to start a spoken conversation using Gemini Live. Alternatively, type a question or command in the Ask Gemini box (see screenshot), or tap the microphone icon to speak one.

To add the Gemini widget to the home screen of your Android device, long-press the screen, select Widgets and swipe down to the Gemini section. Drag the widget to your home screen, where you can resize it as required.



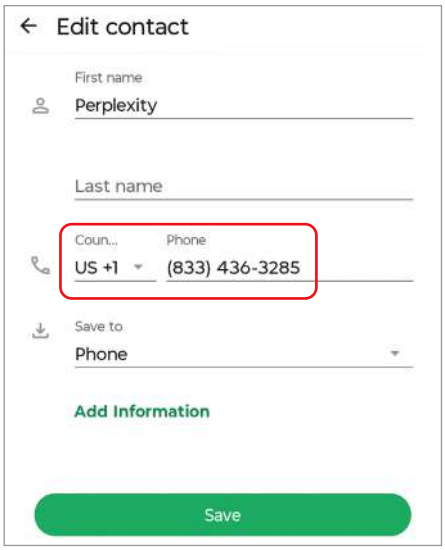
On an iPhone or iPad (which now has a Gemini app: www.snipca.com/54864), long-press the home screen and choose Edit then 'Add widget'. Find the Gemini widget, tap Add Widget and move it to the desired position.

PERPLEXITY

Get instant answers in WhatsApp

As with ChatGPT, you can now talk to Perplexity directly in WhatsApp to get instant, informative answers without opening – or even installing – its app. To do so, you first need to add Perplexity as a contact.

Tap the green 'New chat' button in WhatsApp and choose 'New contact'. Set 'Perplexity' as the first name, then tap the dropdown menu under Country and select United States. Enter the number 1-833-436-3285 (see screenshot above) and press Save.



Unlike WhatsApp's annoying Meta AI tool, Perplexity lets you add files, photos and voice notes to your queries. It can also generate pictures from text prompts.

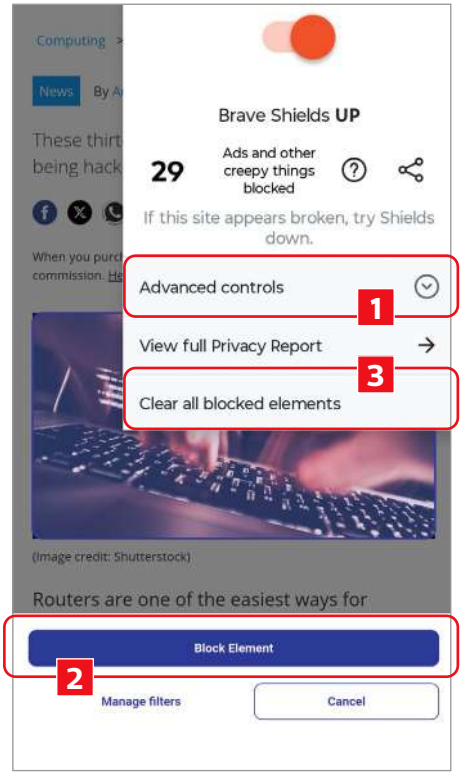
Phone and Tablet Tips

ANDROID

Block specific page elements in Brave

Brave's Android browser (www.snipca.com/54806) automatically blocks ads, trackers and third-party cookies through its Shields feature. This can also block scripts and fingerprinting, and Brave has now added the option to hide unwanted page elements as well.

These include annoying promotional banners, sidebars of clickbait articles, irritating images and anything else that clutters the page and distracts you from the main content. The feature is already available in Brave's desktop browser, but is even more useful on your phone or tablet, where screen space is more limited.



To use the new option, tap the Shields (lion's head) button in the top-right corner of the browser to open the Shields panel. Tap 'Advanced controls' (1 in our screenshot below left) and select 'Block element'.

Press the element you want to remove from the page and tap Block Element 2 to hide it. Brave will remember your choice the next time you visit the site, so you won't see the offending element again. You can unblock elements by tapping the Shields button and choosing 'Clear all blocked elements' 3.

Hopefully, the option will be added to Brave's iOS browser (www.snipca.com/54808) soon.

ANDROID

Manage tabs more easily in Opera

Opera has updated its Android browser (www.snipca.com/54823) with a new tab-management system that makes it easier to organise and switch between multiple web pages. It also brings the Tab Islands feature from the desktop browser to your phone or tablet.

The most notable addition lets you choose from three tab layouts when you have lots of pages open in Opera. Tap the icon in the bottom-left corner (see screenshot right) to select your preferred layout: carousel, grid (pictured) or list. Within each layout, you can drag tabs to rearrange them, and use the search tool in the top-right corner to quickly find specific pages.

If you close a tab accidentally, tap the clock icon on the toolbar to view a list of recently closed tabs, then tap the relevant page to reopen it. To organise tabs using Tab Islands, long-press a tab and drag it on top of another one to create a new group, to which you can add further tabs.

Additionally, Opera now lets you switch to its private-browsing mode by swiping left on its toolbar. Swipe right to return to standard browsing.

iOS

Change app settings using Shortcuts

Apple's Shortcuts app (www.snipca.com/54829), which comes installed on iPhones and iPads, provides an easy way to perform quick actions in your

BEST NEW APPS — What you should install this fortnight

Giga Text

Free*

Android www.snipca.com/54811

Giga Text converts any text you type into the largest font available on your phone.

This is handy for displaying messages to people who can't currently hear you, such as in noisy environments or when they're talking to someone else. You can include emojis, but to change text colour you need to pay £2.89 for the Premium version.

The Guardian

Free*

Android www.snipca.com/54817

iOS www.snipca.com/54818

The revamped Guardian app has a streamlined, "more visual" design and several new features. These include a Podcasts tab, where you can listen to and download its podcasts, and a Puzzles tab featuring crosswords and Sudoku. The 'My Guardian' tab has been updated to make it easier to find and follow topics that interest you.

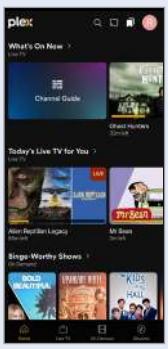
Plex

Free*

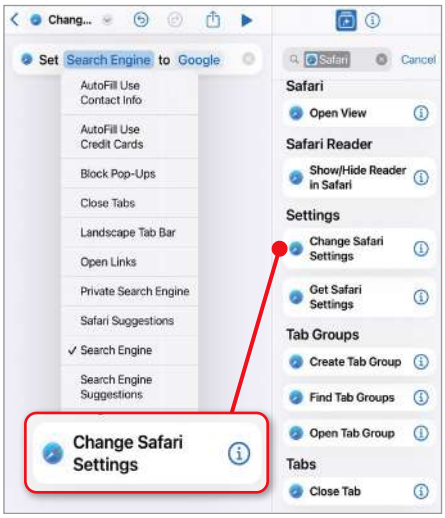
Android www.snipca.com/54810

iOS www.snipca.com/54809

Plex's refreshed mobile app makes it easier to discover and watch free TV shows and films. It has ditched its three-line 'hamburger' menu, so everything can be accessed from its home screen; added dedicated tabs for Live TV and On Demand content; and moved its Watchlist feature to a more prominent position in the top-right corner.



*Contains in-app purchases



favourite apps. These shortcuts have been expanded in iOS and iPadOS 18.4 to give you one-tap control of the settings of various Apple apps. These include Maps, Safari, Calendar, Books and News.

To add these new actions, open the Shortcuts app and tap the plus sign at the top of the screen. You can then either browse to the app whose settings you want to access, or type settings in the search box to list all matching actions.

Tap 'Change [name of app] Settings' (see screenshot above) to add that action to Shortcuts, then tap the blue highlighted text to customise the shortcut. For example, you can set the Safari action to change your default search engine, close all tabs and autofill (or stop autofilling) your contact details in online forms.

To add the shortcut to your home screen, long-press its tile in the All Shortcuts section, then tap Details and choose 'Add to Home Screen'.

ANDROID & iOS

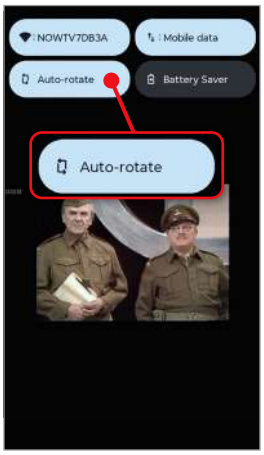
Watch BBC iPlayer in portrait or landscape mode

The BBC has updated its iPlayer app for Android (www.snipca.com/54820) and iOS (www.snipca.com/54821) to use portrait mode when you're holding your phone or tablet upright. This means you no longer need to rotate your device sideways to play TV programmes and films.

The change is intended to "make iPlayer accessible to all", and saves time when you want to view something quickly, rather than settle down to watch the whole thing. The downside is that, whereas landscape mode fills most of your screen, portrait mode plays the video in a small rectangle or square in the centre.

Some iPlayer users have complained that they can no longer switch to landscape mode, which has "ruined the viewing experience". However, this is likely to be caused by their auto-rotate setting being disabled, rather than by the BBC.

To fix the problem on an Android phone or tablet, swipe down from the top of the screen and tap 'Auto-rotate' to turn the option on (see screenshot left). If you can't see that setting, tap the pencil icon and drag the 'Auto-rotate' tile to the top of the list.



On an iPhone or iPad, swipe down from the top-right corner of the screen to open the Control Centre. Press the Portrait Orientation Lock icon (this looks like a padlock in a circle) to lock or unlock auto-rotate.

BEST APPS FOR... Testing device components

Display Tester

Free*

Android www.snipca.com/54831

Display Tester offers a range of tests you can perform to evaluate the quality of your phone or tablet screen. These include checking for defective pixels, verifying all colours are displayed correctly, detecting screen 'burn in' and testing the sensitivity of your touch screen. Upgrade to the Pro version for £1.49 to unlock repair tools.

Best For Testing your device's screen

Phone Doctor Plus

Free

Android www.snipca.com/54833

iOS www.snipca.com/54834

This app performs a series of diagnostic tests to determine if all components in your phone or tablet are working properly. It checks memory, sensors, buttons, cameras, speakers, connectivity and much more, then provides a report of the results. The Android version can also test your device's battery health and uninstall apps.

Best For Diagnostic tests

Sensors Test

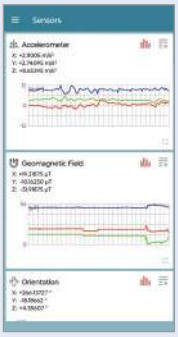
Free*

Android www.snipca.com/54835

iOS www.snipca.com/54836

Sensors Test (called EXA Sensors Toolbox on iOS) offers real-time monitoring of all the sensors in your phone or tablet. These include the accelerometer, gyroscope and geomagnetic field, with detailed graphs provided where available. It also tells you useful information about RAM, storage and battery health.

Best For Analysing sensors



*Contains in-app purchases

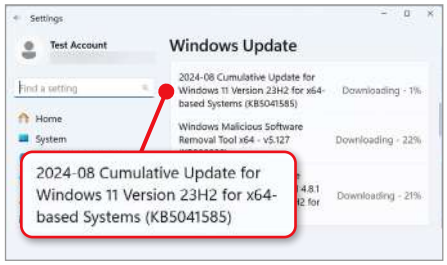
WINDOWS 10 & 11

Dual-boot Windows with Linux

Microsoft has fixed a problem that since last August was preventing users from dual-booting Windows 10 or 11 with Linux. The fix is part of Microsoft's latest 'Patch Tuesday' security update, released on 13 May, and titled KB5041585.

It confirmed the fix online (visit www.snipca.com/54880 and look for 'Resolution' in bold). Microsoft had previously suggested turning off Secure Boot updates as a temporary solution, but this new fix should solve the problem permanently.

Check whether the update has been installed by opening Windows Settings (Windows key+I) then clicking Windows Update followed by 'Update history' and looking for KB5041585 (see screenshot below). Turn to page 60 for advice on switching from Windows 10 to Linux.

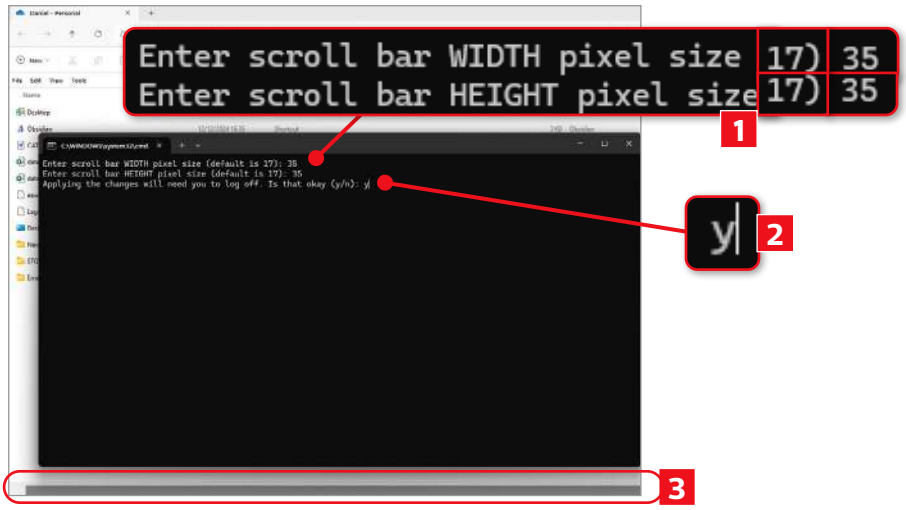

Settings
Test Account
Windows Update
2024-08 Cumulative Update for Windows 11 Version 23H2 for x64-based Systems (KB5041585)
Downloading - 1%
Windows Malicious Software Removal Tool x64 - v5.127
Downloading - 22%
Downloading - 21%
2024-08 Cumulative Update for Windows 11 Version 23H2 for x64-based Systems (KB5041585)

WINDOWS 10 & 11

Change scroll-bar size with one click

You can change the height of horizontal scroll bars and width of vertical scroll bars to make them easier to click, but it requires editing the registry. An easier method is using the program 'Change Scroll Bar Width and Height' from MajorGeeks, which automates the registry steps as a batch file.

Visit www.snipca.com/54881 then click the military-themed Download Now button at the top. Extract and launch the tool and it'll show a command line asking you to change the pixel width and height of the bars, and noting that the default for both is 17. We typed 35 for both (1 in our screenshot below), then pressed Enter. We then typed y 2 and pressed Enter to reboot so the changes would be applied. The screenshot shows the height of our horizontal scroll bar has increased to 35 3. You can now launch the program again whenever you want to resize the scroll bars.

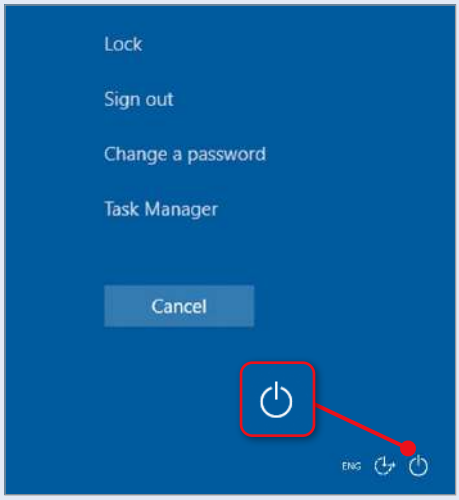


WINDOWS 10 & 11

Trigger an emergency restart if your PC freezes

If your computer freezes you could try turning it off by pressing and holding the power button, though this can corrupt files and cause Windows to become unstable next time you boot.

A more reliable method is to press Ctrl+Alt+Delete to open the Windows Security screen, then hold down the Ctrl key as you click the power button in the bottom-right corner (see screenshot). You'll see the message, 'You are attempting an Emergency Restart. Click OK to immediately restart. Any unsaved data will be lost. Use this only as a last resort.' Click OK to confirm, and your computer will shut down and restart normally. This method is particularly useful when software crashes have made your system completely unresponsive.



WINDOWS 11

Remove phones you've paired with Windows

You can now remove individual Android phones and iPhones you've paired with Windows. Previously, you had to disconnect them all and re-pair the ones you wanted to keep, which was pointlessly convoluted.

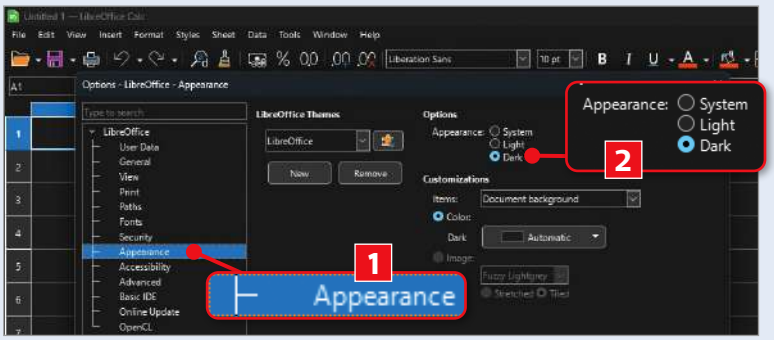
To do this, open Settings (press Windows key+I) then click 'Bluetooth & devices' (1 in our screenshot above) followed by 'Mobile devices'. Now click the blue 'Manage devices' button 2 then select the device and click Remove 3.

You can also do this through the Phone Link app. Click the top-right cog icon followed by Devices on the left. Find the phone you want to disconnect, then click the three vertical dots followed by Remove. These options are available if you're using Windows 11 24H2.

LIBREOFFICE

Change theme independent of system colour

In LibreOffice 25.2, released in February, you can change the program's theme so it looks different to the overall theme of your computer's operating system. This means you can make Windows light or dark, for example, without it affecting LibreOffice's theme. Open LibreOffice, then click Tools followed by Options (or press Alt+F12). Now click Appearance on the left (1 in our screenshot) and make the changes you need. Here we've changed the theme to Dark 2. Click OK to save the changes.

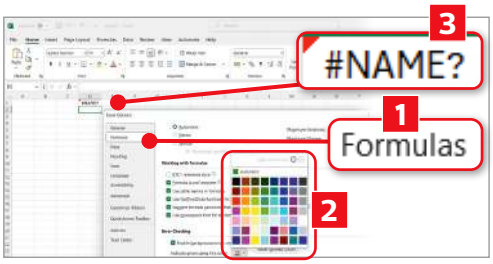


ONLYOFFICE

Add or remove spreadsheet scrollbars

OnlyOffice 8.3, released in February, has added options to show or hide the vertical and horizontal scrollbars in spreadsheets.

Open a spreadsheet, then click File followed by Advanced Settings at the bottom. Now look for the Workspace heading, then tick or untick 'Show horizontal scroll bar' and/or 'Show vertical scroll bar' as required (see screenshot 1 below). Click Apply to confirm. In our example we've chosen to keep the horizontal scrollbar 2, but lose the vertical.



MICROSOFT EXCEL

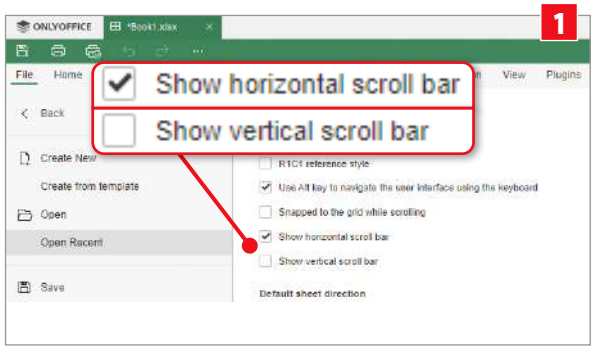
Change the colour for formula errors

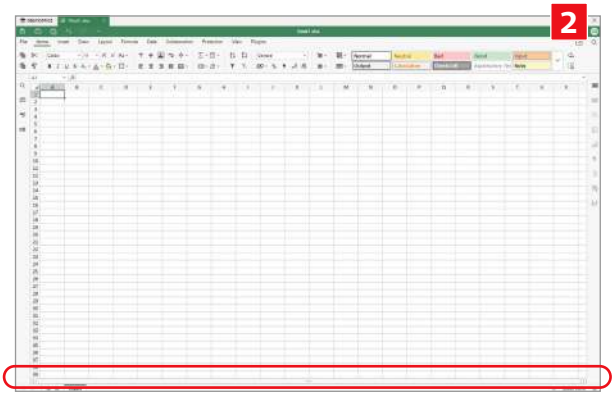
By default, Excel shows a green triangle in the top-left corner of a cell when it detects an error with a formula. You can change this colour by clicking File, Options, then Formulas (1 in our screenshot above). Now click the 'Indicate errors when choosing this color' menu and pick your colour 2. In our example we've chosen red 3.

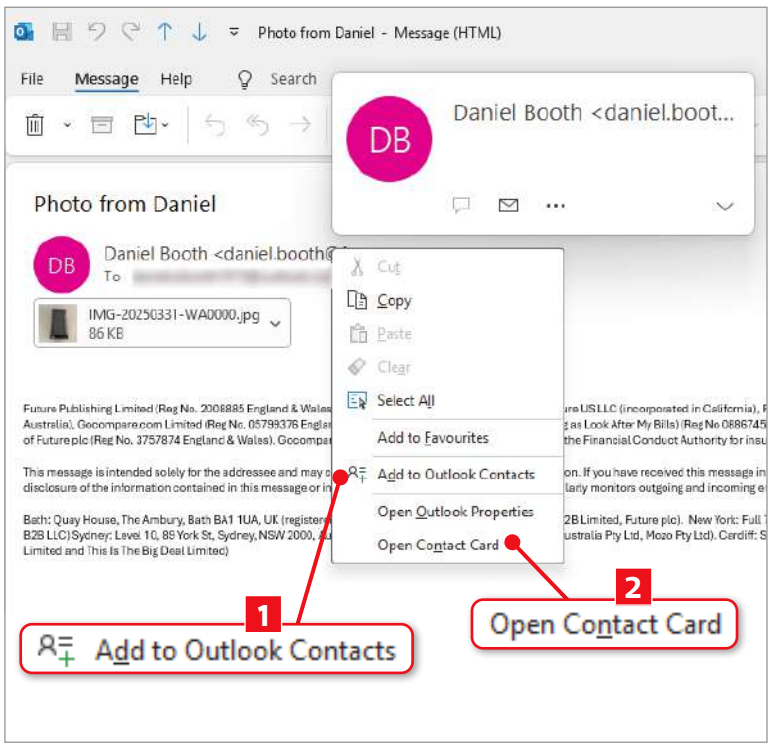
MICROSOFT OUTLOOK

Right-click to add email senders to contacts

The fastest way to add the sender of an email to your contacts list is to open the message, then hover over the email address, right-click it and select 'Add to Outlook Contacts' (1 in our screenshot below). Clicking 'Open Contact Card' 2 shows you what information will be added. To check the contact has been added click the People icon in your left-hand pane. You can also search for contacts in the bar at the top of Outlook.







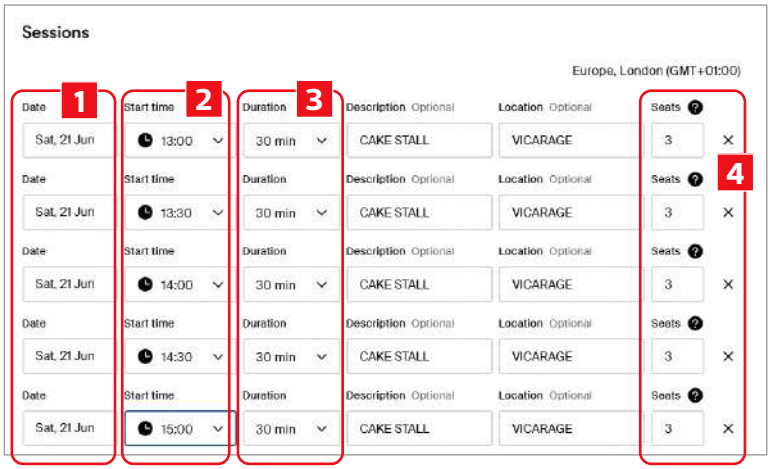
In The Club

Run a club or society? Here's how your tech can make it easier

Let volunteers book timed slots for events

It'll soon be the season for summer fetes, which means finding volunteers to run the cake stall, coconut shy and bouncy castle. One of the easiest methods is creating a Sign-up Sheet in Doodle, which lets you schedule timed slots and email them to potential volunteers. They just simply book the slot they want.

It's wonderfully simple and free, though you'll need to put up with some irritating adverts. To remove these you'll have to pay for a Basic account for $6.95 (£5.21) a month or Pro account for $8.25 (£6.18), which also unlock other features – for details visit www.snipca.com/54848.



Enter an event date, session start time, duration, and how many people you need

Choose session durations

First create a Doodle account at www.snipca.com/54846, then log in. Now click the Products tab at the top then select 'Sign-up Sheet' followed by 'Try it now'. Now give the event a title and an optional description and location below, then choose a video-conferencing tool if the event is online.

Scroll down to the Sessions heading and choose the event date (1 in our screenshot above right). Next, click the start time for each volunteer session 2 followed by the Duration menu to select how long they should last 3. Add an optional description and location, then in the Seats box type how many volunteers you need for that slot 4.

Click the green 'Add a session' button below and repeat for however many sessions you need. Currently, you're limited to 20 sessions, though Doodle says that while Sign-up Sheet remains a beta tool this might vary. Click 'Preview' once you've added all your sessions to check what it looks like. Click 'Close preview' at the top to go back.

Scroll down further to the Settings section and decide whether to tick 'Show participant names to others who signed up' and 'Limit the number of sessions each participant can select'. Ticking the former is a privacy risk, but it may help encourage people to volunteer if they can see who else has put themselves forward. Scroll down to the bottom and click 'Add question' if you want to ask volunteers a question as part of the process.

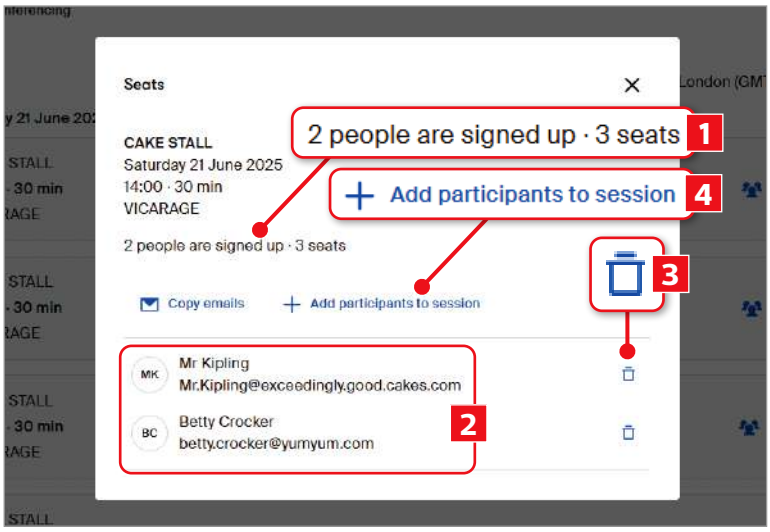
Share your sessions

Once that's done, click 'Create and share'. Next click Share and you'll see an option to add a link to your website. Select this, then copy the text in the 'Link code' and paste it on your site. Change the 'Customize link text' title to what you want. The 'Share' menu also lets you share the sessions on LinkedIn and WhatsApp (you'll need this installed on your computer) .

Alternatively, click the green 'Copy link' to share the link manually – such as by pasting it into a mass email. Doodle will also send you an email confirming that your sheet is ready – click 'Share your Sign-up Sheet' to send it.

When volunteers get the email they'll see which slots are still available. They need to tick the box for the slot they want to work, followed by Continue then 'Confirm booking'.

To keep track of who's booked click the People icon at the right of a session. The box that pops up will show you how many people have signed up (1 in our screenshot left) and who they are 2. Click the bin icon 3 if you don't want them to volunteer. They'll receive an email informing them. You can also copy the email addresses of the volunteers in the box and invite other people to volunteer 4. To see all your creations at any time click Dashboard on the main Doodle page.



Click the People icon to see who has volunteered, then the bin icon if you don't want them involved

Next issue: Make posters, flyers and more using Wixel

What's All the

Fuss About...

Extended support for Office

Microsoft 365 subscribers on Windows 10 will get longer protection

What is it?

Microsoft has announced it will continue supporting Microsoft 365 apps on Windows 10 until October 2028. This means 365 subscribers will keep receiving security updates for Word, Excel, Outlook and PowerPoint. It had originally planned to end support on 14 October 2025.

Is that the same day it ends support for Windows 10?

Yes. Microsoft presumably thought it made sense to axe support for the programs running on Windows 10 on the same day it ends support for the operating system itself. That would make life easier for Microsoft's security teams and avoid giving people a false sense of safety. It was also delivering a message to users that they should upgrade to Windows 11 in order to keep using Office tools.

So why has it changed its mind?

Its official reason, published online (www.snipca.com/54915), is to "help maintain security while you transition to Windows 11". That sounds like a helpful gesture, but some might say Microsoft had no choice given how many Microsoft 365 subscribers still use Windows 10.

Do you have a figure?

Not precisely, but we can estimate. Windows 10 is still running on 53 per cent of the world's Windows computers, which is about 800 million. Given there are 400 million Microsoft 365 subscribers, it's likely tens of millions of them are using Windows 10. That's a lot of potentially angry people who'd be left without support.

But what about all the angry Windows 10 users who *don't* subscribe to Microsoft 365?

A cynic might speculate that Microsoft cares less about them because they're not paying a subscription. Windows 10 was a one-off purchase or came pre-installed on computers, so Microsoft doesn't get any ongoing revenue from those users.

Does it apply to paid-for standalone versions of Office?

No. Microsoft still plans to end support for Office 2016 and 2019 on 14 October 2025, and Office 2021 a year later. It can't make more money from these users, so there's little incentive for Microsoft to extend support.

So this isn't a sign that Microsoft might extend support for Windows 10?

No. If anything, Microsoft's decision underlines its determination to axe Windows 10 on schedule. It's a compromise that responds to the concerns of some users, but doesn't change the core message: we're still ending support for Windows 10 in a few months.

But what's the point of running safe versions of Office tools on an *unsafe* operating system?

Excellent question. It feels contradictory and a bit of a fudge. After all, Microsoft admits that running Office apps after support ends for Windows 10 "can cause performance and reliability issues". Technically, it *will* be safer to use Office apps until 2028 because they run on their own code separate to Windows 10. However, they'll be vulnerable to attacks that target Windows 10 because they're still running on the operating system.

Look again at Microsoft's reasoning above: it wants to help you "transition to Windows 11". That's the point of this extension. It's merely a stop-gap to offer users some limited support while nudging them relentlessly towards Windows 11, which is the company's priority. Subscribers will discover this if they seek help from Microsoft after 14 October.

Why, what will happen?

Microsoft says subscribers will still be able to open support cases, which sounds promising. But if their problem occurs with Office tools *only* on Windows 10, Microsoft's solution will be to ask them to move to Windows 11. If their computer lacks the technical specifications to upgrade, Microsoft will "provide troubleshooting assistance only" and says "technical workarounds might be limited or unavailable". Many Windows 10 users will conclude it's hardly worth bothering with – and that's precisely what Microsoft wants.

ChatGPT VS THE REST

Which chatbot provides the most helpful answers to your search queries and best responses to your prompts? **Robert Irvine** tests 10 AI assistants to find out

Although you probably have a favourite search engine and web browser, you may be undecided about which AI chatbot to use. Spearheaded by ChatGPT, there are now loads of tools to choose from. While you can easily switch between chatbots, it's still useful to know which gives you the most reliable information, generates the highest-quality content and offers the most features. ChatGPT may be the most popular, but that doesn't mean it's the best. In this feature, we help you decide which one to use, by pitting ChatGPT against nine other leading contenders.

HOW WE TESTED THE CHATBOTS

We tested the 10 free versions of AI chatbots through their websites, using their default language models and without enabling additional tools (unless necessary). To get a broad range of responses, we entered these 10 questions and prompts (with our reasons in brackets):

- *What is the best smart TV you can buy for under £300? (recommendations)*
- *Do I need a visa to go on holiday to the EU this summer? (topical)*
- *What will the weather be like in Torquay this weekend? (predictive)*
- *Can I upgrade my unsupported Windows 10 PC to Windows 11? (technical)*
- *What is the best way to fix a leaking kitchen tap? (lifestyle)*
- *Write a letter of complaint to South Western Railway (text generation)*
- *Summarise the content of this Computeractive feature (text analysis)*
- *Compile a round of general-knowledge quiz questions (creative)*
- *Identify the species of flower in this photo (image recognition)*
- *Create an image of a man drinking tea on a rollercoaster (image generation)*

After completing our tests, we rated each chatbot out of five for Features (how many options you can use for free), Performance (speed and detail of response) and Quality (accuracy and helpfulness). We then gave each tool an Overall score.

GOLD AWARD

Gemini

https://gemini.google.com

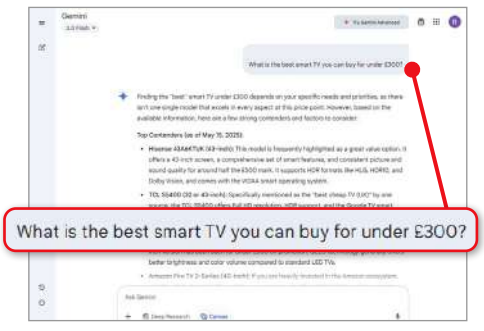
Originally called Bard, Google's AI chatbot received a lukewarm response when it launched in March 2023. Many users found it lacking compared with ChatGPT and it was accused of providing inaccurate information (www.snipca.com/54876). After Bard was rebranded as Gemini a year later, Google made numerous improvements to its performance and capabilities, and it's now the best AI assistant you can use for free.

As well as typing commands and questions into Gemini's message box, you can click its microphone icon to speak them. Its apps for Android (www.snipca.com/54877) and iOS (www.snipca.com/54878) include a clever Live feature that lets you talk aloud to the chatbot like you're chatting to a real person. You can upload images and documents, or add them from Google Drive, to ask Gemini to analyse their content, and use its Deep Research function to get in-depth answers to your queries.

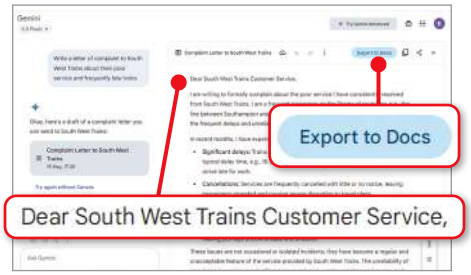
ChatGPT previously had the extra advantage of custom GPTs, which expand its capabilities with extra tools, but now Gemini has them too in the form of Gems (www.snipca.com/54896). Although it has less 'personality' than ChatGPT, our tests found that Gemini is generally faster, better informed and more thorough in its responses.

Our first question to Gemini was: 'What is the best smart TV you can buy for under £300?' (see screenshot below). After pointing out that the 'best' smart TV would depend on our "specific needs and priorities", Gemini listed the top contenders (though without citing its sources). It summarised the benefits of each model, explained the key factors to consider when buying a new TV and ultimately recommended the Hisense 43A6KTUK.

More disappointing was its weather forecast, which simply showed a basic three-day graphic from Google Weather, without any comment or extra information.



Gemini replied to our smart TV query with a detailed and helpful answer



Gemini let us customise and export its excellent letter of complaint

When we asked Gemini whether we'd need a visa to visit the EU this summer, its response included both the current rules and the imminent changes. Citing several official sources, it outlined the new 'European Travel Information and Authorisation System' (ETIAS), when it's likely to be introduced and how much it will cost. It clarified that ETIAS is a 'visa waiver', not a visa, and that the EU is introducing a separate Entry/Exit system (EES) that uses biometric data.

Gemini also gave an impressive reply to our question about upgrading an unsupported Windows 10 PC to Windows 11. It warned of the risks before providing detailed instructions for two methods: one involving registry edits and the other bypassing hardware requirements using Rufus (www.snipca.com/53499).

Our final search query for Gemini was: 'What is the best way to fix a leaking kitchen tap?'. Its comprehensive answer included step-by-step guidance for repairing three types of tap leak – spout, handle and base. Although we would have welcomed some pictures or links to sources, Gemini's advice was reliable and clearly explained.

We next asked Gemini to perform three text-based tasks, starting with writing a letter of complaint to South Western Railway. It quickly produced an excellent template in its Canvas editor. This included an accurate list of 'issues' (such as delayed, cancelled and overcrowded trains) and examples of bad journeys, which we could customise with specific dates and times. Gemini also let us export the letter to Google Docs (see screenshot above).

For the next task, we uploaded the 'dark web' feature from page 62 of this issue and asked Gemini to summarise its content. It quickly and accurately picked out all the key points, without repetition.

Lightening the mood, we got Gemini to compile a round of general-knowledge questions for a quiz. It came up with 20, spanning a wide variety of topics and difficulty, including 'Who invented the worldwide web?'.

Gemini produced a realistic image – aside from the glass of tea

Next, we uploaded a photo of a flower and asked Gemini to identify its species. The chatbot said it was a species of Dietes, most probably an African iris or fortnight lily (*dietes iridioides*). It couldn't be certain without a "clearer view of specific features", but its assertion was correct.

For the final round, we tested Gemini's image-generation abilities by asking it for a picture of a man drinking tea on a rollercoaster. Despite the tea being black and in a glass, the result (pictured above) was impressively detailed and realistic, from the man's beard to the curve of the tracks. Gemini lets you download high-resolution copies of images, without a watermark, and (as with text prompts) it doesn't specify a limit on how many you can create per day – it will tell you when you hit your personal quota.

VERDICT Gemini gives you more for free than any other chatbot. Its Advanced plan, which costs £19 a month, offers integration with Google Docs, Drive and Gmail, more advanced language models and video generation, but for everyday tasks and queries the standard Gemini is all you need.

FEATURES ★★★★★
PERFORMANCE ★★★★
QUALITY ★★★★★
OVERALL ★★★★★

SILVER AWARD

ChatGPT

www.chatgpt.com

Launched by OpenAI in November 2022, ChatGPT quickly became the best-known chatbot and has helped bring AI into the mainstream. Its simplicity, friendly patter and authoritative responses have helped ChatGPT maintain its popularity, aided by OpenAI gradually making more features available for free.

It now includes web-search capabilities, 'reasoning' for more in-depth answers and a 'Deep research' tool that produces reports on given topics by 'synthesising' large amounts of online information. You can also use its voice mode in your browser or the ChatGPT apps for Windows, Android and iOS (www.snipca.com/54924) for hands-free conversations.

Frustratingly, despite recent improvements to its image-generation tool (see Issue 708, page 74), ChatGPT still only lets you create and edit three pictures a day. The Plus version, which costs £20 a month, increases the limit to 200 per day, and also gives you access to the latest language models, expanded versions of ChatGPT tools and shorter waiting times – the free version can be slow during peak hours.

In our first test, ChatGPT went further than Gemini by providing photos of its smart TV recommendations, and links to buy them on stores including Amazon, Argos and Currys (see screenshot below). Though these looked sponsored, ChatGPT says it "chooses products independently". Unlike Gemini, it didn't offer general buying advice, but it helpfully cited the sources of the 'Why Choose It' summaries for each model.

ChatGPT's weather forecast for Torquay listed lots of useful information, including temperatures, humidity, precipitation and UV Index. However, its prediction that Sunday would hit a high of 22°C ("don't forget sun protection") was over-optimistic.

Its response to our EU-visa question was less elaborate than Gemini's, but the information about ETIAS was accurate. We also liked that ChatGPT bullet-pointed the key details.

ChatGPT went one better than Gemini by suggesting three ways to bypass Windows 11-upgrade requirements, along with the requisite warning. Unfortunately, the third method was based on an outdated article, and no longer works.

Although ChatGPT didn't distinguish between different types of tap leak, it included a helpful 'How to fix a leaking tap' video from B&Q. We also liked its list of 'Tools and materials you may need', but its practical advice wasn't as clear as Gemini's.

When we asked ChatGPT to generate a complaint letter to South Western Railway, it thoughtfully filled in the customer-service address for us – Gemini just said to look it up. However, the letter's content wasn't as focused as Gemini's, and could only be customised by entering a follow-up prompt.

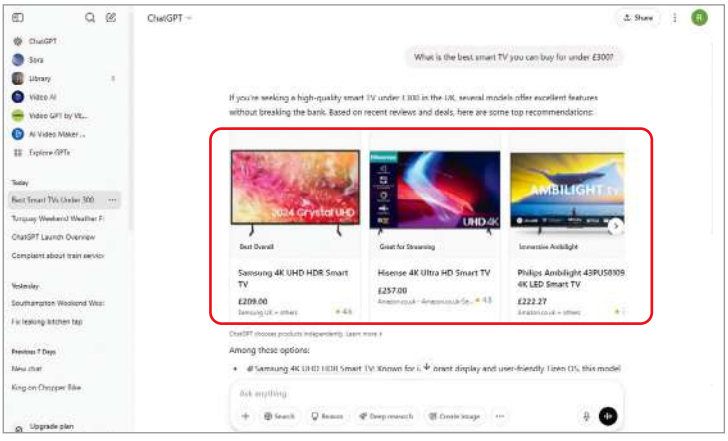
ChatGPT's summary of our 'dark web' feature covered all the important information, and provided an accurate overview of the theme of the article: "vigilance and proactive steps to secure your personal information".

For our quiz prompt, ChatGPT suggested 15 questions, covering subjects including geography, history and current affairs. These were very easy, such as: 'Who is the current President of the United States?', which may be why it didn't bother including answers.

ChatGPT identified the flower in our photo as *dietes grandiflora*, "commonly known as the African iris, wild iris or large wild iris". Though it got the genus right, the species was actually *dietes iridioides*.

We had to wait several minutes for ChatGPT to create our picture because "lots of people are creating images right now". The resulting image (above) got the cup of tea right, but it overdid the rollercoaster tracks in the background and made the man's skin look too waxy to be lifelike.

ChatGPT's AI-generated man looked too waxy to be lifelike


What is the best smart TV you can buy for under £300?
Samsung 4K UHD HDR Smart TV
£209.00
Hisense 4K Ultra HD Smart TV
£257.00
Philips Ambilight 43PUS8109 4K LED Smart TV
£222.27
Among these options:

ChatGPT often provides links to buy recommended products from online stores

VERDICT ChatGPT is undoubtedly a fantastic AI tool, with lots of useful features. However, the limits of its free version and occasionally inaccurate and unfocused answers give Gemini the edge.

FEATURES ★★★★★

PERFORMANCE ★★★★

QUALITY ★★★★

OVERALL ★★★★★

BRONZE AWARD

Perplexity

www.perplexity.ai

Unlike ChatGPT (and Gemini), Perplexity is primarily an AI-powered search engine with an integrated chatbot, rather than vice versa. This means you get handy search features such as auto-complete suggestions as you type your queries, and 'related' follow-up questions for more precise answers. It's also amazingly fast, outpacing nearly all the other tools we tested.

Perplexity's free plan offers unlimited searches using a single AI model and lets you upload 10 files a day for analysis. It also gives you five daily 'enhanced' searches using Perplexity Pro, which increases the number of AI models, scans three times as many sources for more detailed answers and includes image generation. Upgrading to Pro costs £19.49 a month or £195 a year.

It's light on features compared with Gemini and ChatGPT, though it recently introduced Perplexty Assistant in its Android (www.snipca.com/54897) and

iOS apps (www.snipca.com/54898). This lets you perform searches and other tasks using your voice.

Like Gemini, Perplexity recommended the Hisense 43A6KTUK as the best smart TV for under £300, but its presentation was superior. It included images, links to its sources, clear summaries of the specifications and benefits of each model, and a comparison table.

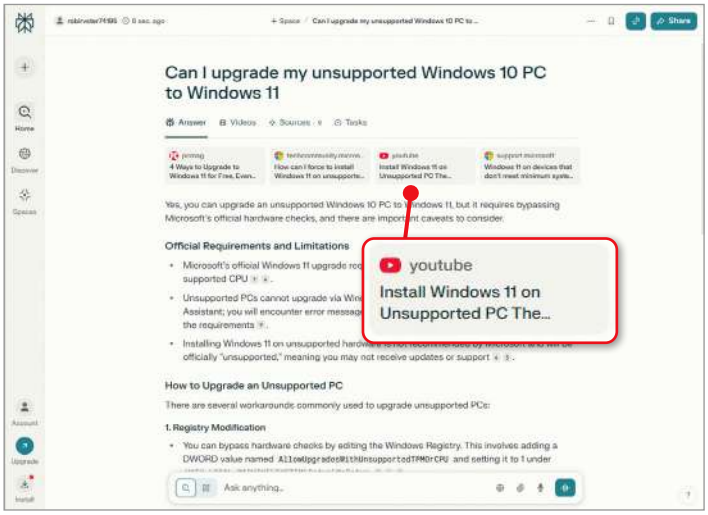
Perplexity responded to our Torquay-weather query with an accurate five-day forecast graphic, using data from AccuWeather. It noted that the "sunny and delightful" conditions would be great for outdoor activities.

When we asked about travelling to the EU, Perplexity summarised the facts about ETIAS and EES, and provided links to the relevant sources. It also suggested relevant follow-up questions such as 'Can UK citizens visit Ireland without an ETIAS?'.

Perplexity gave an excellent answer to our question about upgrading to Windows 11. It was the only chatbot to mention the new tool Flyby11 (www.snipca.com/54882), included links to relevant videos (see screenshot above right) and even provided a summary table of the various methods and their respective risks.

While we were slightly disappointed by Perplexity's initial answer to our leaking-tap question, which provided only 'general steps', further advice was available from its related questions, such as 'How do I know if I need to replace the washer or the O-ring'? Best of all, it linked to YouTube videos that demonstrated how to stop a tap dripping.

Perplexity's AI image was high quality, albeit slightly dark


Can I upgrade my unsupported Windows 10 PC to Windows 11
youtube
Install Windows 11 on Unsupported PC The...
How to Upgrade an Unsupported PC
Ask anything...

Perplexity provided impressively detailed responses to our query about upgrading to Windows 11

Perplexity produced a polite but 'dissatisfied' complaint letter to South Western Railway, which mentioned train delays and cancellations, even specifying 15 to 30-minute waiting times. But it was less clear about the action it wanted the company to take.

As well as concisely summarising our dark-web feature, Perplexity provided links to relevant news stories about data breaches. It was less interested in our quiz prompt, only suggesting 10 simple questions, such as 'Which planet is known as the Red Planet?'.

Perplexity confidently identified our flower as Dietes, "commonly known as the African iris or fortnight lily". It didn't mention the precise species, but provided links to a relevant website and Reddit discussion.

As image-generation is only available with 'enhanced' Perplexity Pro searches, and we'd used up our free daily quota, we had to wait until the next day to create our tea-drinking man on a rollercoaster. The result (left) was pretty good, if a little dark, but not as realistic as Gemini's effort. Usefully, Perplexity suggested similar images from stock-photo sites – though without the beverage.

VERDICT While Perplexity's daily limits are frustrating, its free search results still provide accurate and detailed information almost instantly. It's as close a rival to Google search as it is to Gemini and ChatGPT.

FEATURES ★★

PERFORMANCE ★★★★★

QUALITY ★★★★

OVERALL ★★★★

BEST OF THE REST

Grok

www.grok.com

Grok was originally limited to users with an X (formerly Twitter) account, but that restriction was lifted at the start of the year. It uses its own Grok 3 language model to process your prompts and has more personality than most chatbots, responding to queries in a casual tone.

Like ChatGPT, Grok includes options – called DeepSearch and Think – for generating more in-depth answers by using more sources and 'reasoning', though you can only try these twice every 24 hours for free. It lets you create 10 images every two hours, and offers terrific editing tools for customising pictures, such as by changing the background, removing unwanted people and applying effects.

On the downside, Grok is noticeably slower to respond than other chatbots, and its paid-for plan – which increases usage limits and offers "extended access" to DeepSearch and Think – costs a steep £30 a month or £300 a year. However, Grok's voice mode (which previously required a subscription) is now available for free in its Android (www.snipca.com/54899) and iOS (www.snipca.com/54900) apps.

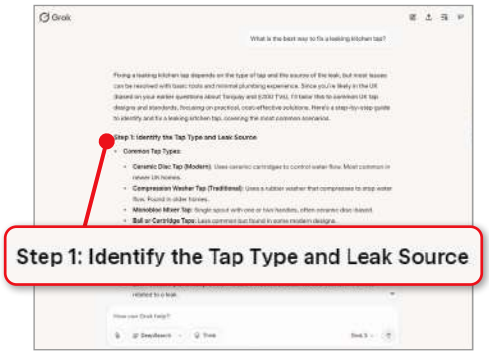
After warning us that budget TVs can be of poor quality, Grok provided an impressive amount of information about each recommendation – as with Gemini and Perplexity, its top pick was the Hisense 43A6KTUK. We liked that it explained the pros and cons of each model, and mentioned the latest deals – though the prices weren't always accurate.

Grok also included lots of detail for its Torquay weather forecast, both as an

outlook for the weekend and specific conditions ("partly cloudy with a chance of showers, particularly in the morning").

With our EU-travel question, Grok was very informative about ETIAS and EES, though its combination of old and new sources meant some of its advice was contradictory. It suggested you "might need an ETIAS for entry from mid-2025", which is no longer true.

Grok gave us lots of useful advice about upgrading to Windows 11, providing step-by-step instructions for using Rufus or a registry tweak. It also suggested ways to avoid upgrading, such as switching to Linux (see page 60).



Grok provided in-depth instructions for fixing a leaky kitchen tap

Our enquiry about fixing a leaking tap yielded Grok's most detailed response. This included summaries of common tap types and leak sources (see screenshot below left), useful information about where to buy parts (such as washers) and clear instructions.

Like Gemini, Grok presented its complaint letter in a text editor, so we could tweak the content as required. The tone was firmer than the other AI tools', demanding compensation through the Delay Repay scheme.

Grok wasn't as insightful as our award winners at summarising our dark-web feature, focusing on the names of tools, rather than reasons for using them. Like Perplexity, it suggested only 10 questions for our general-knowledge quiz. In fact, some were the same, suggesting it used the same source.

Grok incorrectly identified our flower as blue-eyed grass (*sisyrinchium bellum*), which it doesn't resemble at all, so we're unsure where that information came from.

It responded well to our image prompt, generating a realistic-looking man on a (rather flat) rollercoaster ride. It also gave us an alternative version, but in both Grok's cup of tea looked weakly brewed.

Grok produced a realistic man holding a weak cup of tea

VERDICT There's a lot to like about Grok (aside from its awful name), but its responses are variable in their level of detail and accuracy. This may be caused by it including X posts in its sources.

FEATURES ★★★★★
PERFORMANCE ★★★
QUALITY ★★★★
OVERALL ★★★★

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JUST SO YOU KNOW...

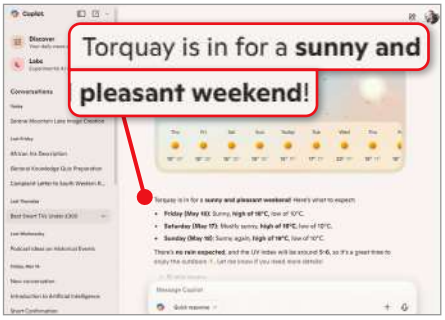
This offer can be used by one person only, and expires at midnight on **17 June, 2025**. It's a lifetime licence for one computer.

Copilot

www.snipca.com/54872

Microsoft's now ubiquitous 'AI companion' offers many of the same features as ChatGPT – including file analysis, voice mode and a Think Deeper option for more in-depth answers. It's more generous with image generation, letting you create 15 images per day, but its responses to our prompts were hit and miss.

For example, Copilot based its smart-TV recommendations on a single online article, and failed to elaborate beyond the content of that source. More helpful was its weather information, providing a 10-day forecast for Torquay, accompanied by summaries of conditions from Friday to Sunday (see screenshot below).



Copilot helpfully provided us with a 10-day weather forecast for Torquay

On the subject of EU travel, Copilot was not only vague, but wrong. Citing a BBC News article from August 2024, it said ETIAS comes into effect this summer, when it's actually been delayed until late 2026.

As a Microsoft tool, we were surprised when Copilot suggested workarounds for bypassing Windows 11's upgrade requirements. But its advice was so vague they weren't of any use anyway.

Annoyingly, Copilot misunderstood our quiz prompt, generating a quiz for us to take rather than host. Even after we explained what we needed, the chatbot still didn't get it. It was more successful at identifying our flower as an African iris.

Copilot's image generation (below) was satisfactory, though the man's disproportionate head undermined its attempts at realism.

The man's head in Copilot's picture was too big for his body

VERDICT Copilot provides responses that appear useful but lack detail on closer inspection. It's fast and friendly, but can't compete with our award winners or Grok.

FEATURES ★★★★
PERFORMANCE ★★★
QUALITY ★★★
OVERALL ★★★

Meta AI

www.meta.ai

You can try Meta AI without signing in, but you must do so using your Facebook account if you want to create images using its Imagine tool or try its Talk voice mode (see screenshot below). Unfortunately, this allows Meta to collect your data to show you personalised ads across its other products.

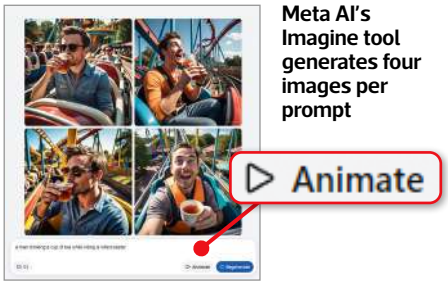
You need to sign into Meta AI using Facebook to try its Talk voice mode

Our tests got off to a bad start, when Meta AI ignored the key aspect of our budget-TV query by suggesting three models priced *over* £300. It also missed the point of our question about upgrading to Windows 11, simply telling us to check if our PC met the relevant requirements.

The chatbot was more helpful with the weekend weather forecast, providing details of cloud cover, wind speed, precipitation and humidity. It also got the basic facts right about ETIAS and fixing a tap, though it didn't go into enough detail to be really helpful.

Meta AI doesn't support uploading files, so we were unable to get a summary of our dark-web feature or an analysis of our flower photo. It responded to our quiz prompt with 10 very easy questions and multiple-choice answers.

After reluctantly signing in to use its Imagine tool, we actually found the results to be great quality. You get four detailed pictures per prompt (with no specified daily limit), which you can customise with different styles and bring to life by clicking Animate (see below).



Meta AI's Imagine tool generates four images per prompt

VERDICT Meta AI compensates for its woolly answers with its impressive image-generation tool. It's just a shame you have to share your data to use it.

FEATURES ★★★
PERFORMANCE ★★★
QUALITY ★★★
OVERALL ★★★

Why we haven't included DeepSeek

When DeepSeek launched in January, the Chinese chatbot was touted as a 'ChatGPT killer', and swiftly became the most downloaded Android and iOS app. However, while DeepSeek produces fast, accurate and detailed responses, it's also a privacy nightmare.

Several countries (including Italy, Australia and Canada) and a number of US states have banned use of the app on government devices, amid fears it could pass data to Chinese intelligence agencies.

DeepSeek's privacy policy (www.snipca.com/54901) confirms it collects and shares a huge amount of your personal data, going far beyond what's required for training AI language models. As you can't use DeepSeek without an account, there's no way to opt out of this data collection.

Additionally, security researchers have discovered hidden tracking code in DeepSeek's apps and website, and vulnerabilities relating to weak encryption. We therefore decided it would be much too risky to include DeepSeek in this feature.

HuggingChat

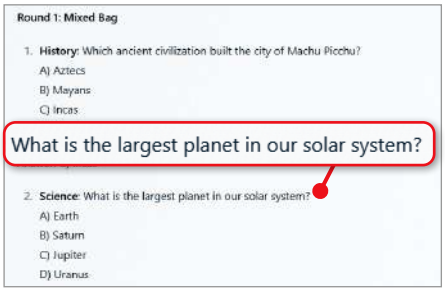
www.snipca.com/54875

HuggingChat lets you choose from a dozen AI language models, to decide which one best suits your needs. You can also use tools and 'assistants' (similar to custom GPTs) created by its community to perform specific tasks such as generating images, analysing documents and writing code. As with the other chatbots in this feature, we stuck with HuggingChat's default language model.

HuggingChat responded speedily, albeit concisely to our TV query, recommending five budget models. It can't provide real-time weather updates, but suggested several weather websites. The chatbot correctly said you don't need a visa for short-term EU travel, but incorrectly suggested ETIAS was introduced in 2023.

HuggingChat's complaint letter to South Western Railway included impressively specific details such as faulty air conditioning and a need to invest in rolling stock. This contrasted with its terse summary of our dark-web feature, which consisted of a single paragraph.

The chatbot used a multiple-choice format for our general-knowledge quiz (see screenshot below), though the 10 questions were so simple ('What is the largest planet in our solar system?') this


Round 1: Mixed Bag
1. History: Which ancient civilization built the city of Machu Picchu?
A) Aztecs
B) Mayans
C) Incas
What is the largest planet in our solar system?
2. Science: What is the largest planet in our solar system?
A) Earth
B) Saturn
C) Jupiter
D) Uranus

HuggingChat compiled our quiz in a multiple-choice format, but the questions were too easy

HuggingChat's image was too small to be of practical use

was hardly necessary.

As HuggingChat's default model can only respond to 'text-based input', we activated its Image Generation tool to create our picture (above). The result was acceptable, but the image was too small (768KB) to be much use.

VERDICT HuggingChat is ideal for experimenting with AI models and add-ons, but with its default settings its responses are a mixed bag.

FEATURES ★★★

PERFORMANCE ★★★

QUALITY ★★★

OVERALL ★★★

Claude

www.claude.ai

Anthropic's Claude chatbot has a more sophisticated interface than rival tools. We particularly like its file-analysis feature, which takes screenshots of web pages (pictured above right) so you can ask questions about their content.

Claude recently added web-search capabilities, but only for Pro users – a subscription costs £13 a month and increases its (unspecified) daily usage

Claude can analyse screenshots you take of your browser tabs

limits. As we discovered, this means you can't get up-to-date information in its free plan (Anthropic says web search is "coming soon" for free users).

For our smart-TV query, Claude provided a short list of recommendations, but admitted its 'knowledge cut-off' was October 2024. That also prevented Claude from giving us a weather forecast and confirming the new EU-travel rules, because "entry requirements might have changed between my cut-off and now".

We were pleased when our Windows 11-upgrade query elicited a proper response from Claude. But sadly this was so basic it was of little practical value.

Claude was much better at drafting a complaint letter, listing the problems we may have experienced and the actions we wanted the railway to take. It also enthusiastically compiled our general-knowledge quiz, suggesting 30 questions across six categories, and correctly identified our flower.

Claude can't create photorealistic images of people, so instead it turned our man-on-a-rollercoaster prompt into a child's drawing (pictured below).

Claude can't create images of people so drew us a picture instead

VERDICT Claude's free plan is skimpy on detail and can't currently search the web. When it adds that feature, we expect it will produce higher-quality responses.

FEATURES ★★★

PERFORMANCE ★★★

QUALITY ★★

OVERALL ★★★

Try a different language model

Most AI chatbots offer a choice of large-language models (LLMs) beyond their default settings. Indeed, HuggingChat and Poe would rank higher in our comparison if we'd rated the variety of LLMs.

Because AI technology is developing at a rapid pace, the latest AI models provide more detailed and accurate results, drawing on a wider range of sources, performing deeper analysis and 'thinking' before responding. Some are also 'multimodal', which means they can generate images, audio and video in addition to text content.

Google says its new Gemini 2.5 Pro model is the most intelligent yet (www.snipca.com/54916), while OpenAI makes similar claims for its o3 model (www.snipca.com/54917). You can view a leaderboard of LLMs at Chatbot Arena (www.snipca.com/54918).

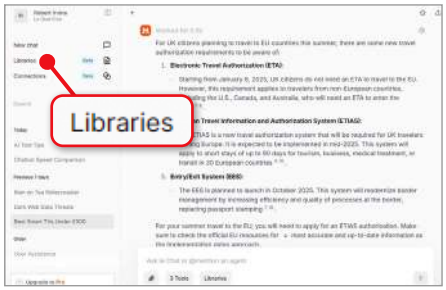
Switching your chatbot's LLM is as simple as clicking the menu next to the search box or in the top-left corner. The more advanced models are usually only available with a subscription, but you may get a limited trial in your free plan.

Mistral Le Chat

www.snipca.com/54873

French AI company Mistral claims Le Chat is the fastest chatbot in the world. It certainly responds very quickly, faster than all the other tools we tested, though we found it as snippy in tone as it is snappy in speed.

You can ask Le Chat 10 questions a day without an account - doing so removes this limit and unlocks image generation, web search and file analysis. Usefully, you can upload files to a 'library' (see screenshot below) and analyse them from there.



Le Chat responded quickly but perfunctorily to our search queries

Le Chat's smart TV recommendations were perfunctory, failing to draw much information from its cited sources. It also replied curtly to our EU-travel query, mentioning ETIAS (with the wrong date), but without elaboration.

Unlike our award-winning chatbots, its free plan doesn't have an option for more in-depth answers – for that you need to pay £14.99 per month for Le Chat Pro. So we were unsurprised that its options for upgrading Windows 10 to Windows 11 failed to include instructions.

We were also disappointed when Le Chat told us the flower in our photo "appears to be an iris", without suggesting the species. Its image generation (below left) was more impressive, producing a well-composed picture depicting a relaxed man holding a decent cup of tea.

VERDICT Le Chat is impressively fast, but it seems aloof and unhelpful compared to the friendliness of ChatGPT.

FEATURES ★★★
PERFORMANCE ★★★
QUALITY ★★
OVERALL ★★★

Poe

www.poe.com

Rather than set limits on messages and image generation, Poe has a points system. You get 3,000 points a day to use as you please, with the more advanced AI models and bots – Poe lets you choose from dozens (see screenshot below) – requiring more points per prompt.

This flexibility is great for experimenting and also necessary, because Poe's default assistant can be unreliable. When we asked for a weekend weather forecast, it initially said it couldn't provide real-time updates, but asking again yielded the necessary information. Its response to our EU visa question was outdated, failing to mention ETIAS, and its cursory instructions for fixing a tap used the American term 'faucet'.

Selecting its Web-Search option provided more up-to-date information for our search queries, but the quality still paled in comparison to rival tools.

Poe's letter to South Western Railway was more of a grumble than a complaint, and annoyed us by spelling 'traveller' as 'traveler'. And its three-paragraph summary of our dark-web feature was accurate but didn't indicate the purpose of the piece. Like HuggingChat and Meta AI, Poe used a multiple-choice format for our quiz, and it produce many of the same questions. Poe's default language model can't identify images, but trying a different one (wrongly) said our flower was a Dutch iris. And though its image generation was fast, the result (below) was cartoony, with an unpleasant, plasticky sheen.

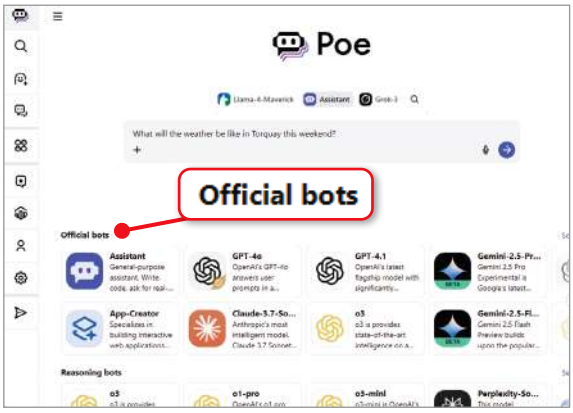
Poe's generated image looked cartoony and unpleasant

VERDICT Poe is really a platform for accessing superior AI tools, which it makes easy to do. Its own assistant is rather basic.

FEATURES ★★★
PERFORMANCE ★★
QUALITY ★★
OVERALL ★★

ca

Le Chat generated a visually impressive AI image



Poe lets you choose between dozens of AI models and chatbots

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Block on your network
Block on WhatsApp
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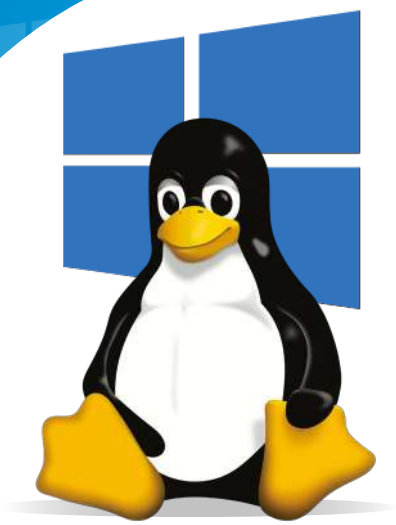
Should you ditch Windows 10 for Linux?

Wondering what to do with your old PC when Microsoft drops support for Windows 10? **Jonathan Parkyn** explains the pros and cons of choosing the Linux route



Microsoft's strict system requirements for Windows 11 mean that millions of Windows 10 users can't install the newer OS on their existing PCs without attempting convoluted and risky hacks. So, when Windows 10 takes its final bow this October, you could be forgiven for assuming there are only two viable options: carry on using your computer regardless (possible but hazardous) or buy a new computer that comes with Windows 11 installed. But there is another option – one that won't cost you any money. You could install Linux instead.

Linux is a free operating system available in a wide variety of versions – or distributions (distros) – many of which look and work just like Windows. There are some surprising benefits to going the Linux route, too – as well as some potential pitfalls you need to be aware of.

We're not suggesting you should make a permanent switch to Linux; we still think Windows 11 is the better choice. However, the two distros we recommend here represent a great way to save your current Windows 10 PC from the skip. If you've already committed to buying a Windows 11 model, you could use Linux to turn your old PC into a very useful secondary computer.

What are the benefits?

Linux's big advantage is that (in most cases) it's completely free and open-source. Some distros are developed and maintained by community-driven organisations and volunteers, others by commercial or non-profit companies. This approach provides some security benefits too, because security flaws and bugs are usually fixed quickly by community members.

Linux is also less of a target for hackers and criminals than Windows, and essential system files are protected by default. Currently supported Linux distros will continue to receive updates and patches, while Windows 10 will effectively stop being safe as soon as 14 October rolls around.

Also, because Linux uses fewer resources than Windows 11, you can run it on computers with low specifications. Indeed, it should run smoothly on machines that are up to 15 years old.

Most Linux distros have a store where you can browse and install thousands of free apps

It's highly customisable, letting you personalise your computing environment, and tailor it to a very Windows-like experience.

The best distros come with everything you need pre-installed: web browsers, email clients, office programs, image-editing tools and so on. There's usually some kind of built-in app store where you can browse and install thousands of additional applications for free. The app store in our screenshot below left is from Mint, one of the two distros we'll be recommending here.

What are the drawbacks?

Compatibility can be a problem. You can't install and run Windows software on Linux, for example – though there are workarounds. Tools like Wine (www.winehq.org) let you run Windows programs using something called a compatibility layer. Or you could use VirtualBox (www.virtualbox.org) to set up a virtual Windows 10 computer that you can run safely offline to access programs you can't run within Linux.

It's likely you won't need to go to these lengths, however. The cross-platform nature of modern software development means that many Linux tools are already well known to Windows users. Browsers like Firefox, Chrome and Brave all work in Linux, while Thunderbird, LibreOffice, GIMP, VLC media player and Audacity are just a few of the other familiar names you'll

Try Linux before ditching Windows 10

We'll publish full instructions in a forthcoming issue, but trying Linux is a relatively simple process – download the Mint or Zorin ISO file and use a free tool, such as Rufus (https://rufus.ie) or BalenaEtcher (https://etcher.balena.io) to create a bootable USB flash drive. You'll need a drive with a capacity of 8GB or more and you may need to tweak your PC's boot priority in your BIOS or UEFI settings to prioritise USB booting over booting from your internal hard drive or SSD.

Plug in your USB drive, restart your PC and wait until the Linux distro launches. Now select the 'Try' button (1 in our screenshot) so you can test it without affecting your existing Windows installation. If you like it, don't press the Install button 2 just yet. First back up all your files before proceeding, so go back to Windows and save copies of all your documents, photos and other files to an external drive. When you're ready, boot back into your distro of choice, hit the Install button and follow the on-screen prompts.

encounter. You can also use online versions of popular tools, including Microsoft Office and Google Docs, in your browser regardless of the operating system you're running.

A bigger stumbling block could be hardware compatibility. You might find that certain components (Wi-Fi adapters, fingerprint readers and so on) or peripherals such as printers and scanners may lack driver support for Linux, which means they might not work properly – or at all.

Additionally, switching to Linux will inevitably involve something of a learning curve. Linux is far easier to use than it used to be, but even the most Windows-like distros can't match it click for click. Everyday tasks, such as changing settings, troubleshooting problems or installing hardware all work a little differently. You may encounter unfamiliar terminology, and you'll need to perform more tasks using command-line controls than you do in Windows.

Which distro is best for you?

A distro is essentially a 'flavour' of Linux. Each one is based on the same Linux kernel (the core system software), but comes wrapped in a different desktop environment, with its own selection of drivers and apps pre-installed.

Some distros are more polished than others. Linux Lite (www.linuxliteos.com), for example, is a bit basic. Some have hidden costs (Red Hat Enterprise Linux charges a fee for support and certification) or limited long-term support (Fedora only supports each release for about 13 months).

Others have less obvious downsides. Ubuntu (https://ubuntu.com), for example, is very easy to use and resembles Windows, but recent changes have made it less reliable. If you're looking for the best replacement for Windows 10 then, for us, it comes down to Zorin or Mint.

Zorin looks modern and resembles Windows 10, with its 'Z' logo replacing the Start menu...

...while the Cinnamon version of Mint looks more like Windows 7 – but has a familiar taskbar

Who would Zorin OS suit?

After decades of using Windows, familiarity is likely to be your priority. For our money, Zorin offers the smoothest switch – which isn't surprising because it's based on Ubuntu and has been designed to ease the transition from Microsoft's operating system.

The default layout is very similar, with a clean, polished Windows-esque look, including a Start button (the Z icon, see screenshot above). And you can use the Zorin Appearance app to customise the desktop so it feels even more familiar.

Zorin feels snappy and stable, even on older machines. Minimum requirements are low; you'll need a PC with at least a 1GHz dual-core Intel or AMD 64bit processor, 1.5GB RAM, 15GB of storage and a screen with a resolution of 1024x768 pixels or more. The current version (17.3, www.snipca.com/54892) will be supported until 1 June 2027, after which you can easily upgrade to a newer version.

As with most Linux distros, you can try Zorin before you commit to installing it (see the box above). To get it, visit www.snipca.com/54893, scroll down and click the Download button under 'Zorin OS 17.3 Core'. This is the free version of Zorin (the Pro edition costs £47.99), and it comes with everything most people will need. You'll be asked to enter your email address before downloading, but you can click 'Skip to download' if you prefer to avoid this.

Who would Linux Mint suit?

Mint looks less modern than Zorin, but it's more established and has a vast support community. It comes in a variety of editions and we recommend the Cinnamon edition for the most Windows-like experience, with a Start menu, taskbar (see screenshot above) and so on.

It's actually a little more like Windows 7 than 10, which will suit many people. And because it's designed to be highly customisable, you can get it looking and working just the way you want. As with Zorin, Mint is lightweight and has basic requirements (2GB of RAM, 20GB of storage space, and needs just a 1024x768-pixel monitor).

Each major Mint release is supported with security updates for five years. The current version (Linux Mint 22.1 Xia, www.snipca.com/54894) is supported until April 2029, but you'll continue to receive updates as long as you continue upgrading to newer versions as they're released.

Visit www.snipca.com/54895 then click the Download button under Cinnamon Edition. Next, click the 'University of Kent UK Mirror Service' link (a reliable UK-based mirror) to download the ISO file. ca

Is your data on the dark web?

Criminals could be selling your personal information on sites you can't access in your browser. **Robert Irvine** explains how to find out what the dark web knows about you

Unless you engage in illegal or highly confidential activities, you generally don't need to worry about the dark web. But when your data is involved in a breach or leak, it's often where that information ends up, so it can be bought and used by criminals.

It's therefore important to know as soon as possible whether your personal information is being sold on the dark web. Here are the best free ways to find out, so you can take immediate action.

What is the dark web?

The dark web – or darknet – is part of the internet that isn't indexed by traditional search engines and can only be accessed using specialist software, most commonly Tor Browser (www.snipca.com/54847, see screenshot below). Dark websites have 56-character onion addresses, and all traffic to and from them is encrypted by the Tor network.

Tor Browser is the most popular means of accessing the dark web

It's estimated that 50 to 60 per cent of dark websites host illegal content and services. But it's not all bad: other onion sites are used for legal, privacy-related purposes, such as whistleblowing, anonymous communication and beating internet censorship.

Why would my data be on it?

Criminals use darknet marketplaces to buy and sell stolen account details, payment-card numbers and other personal information. If your data has been involved in a breach or leak, there's a strong possibility it will end up on the dark web before the affected company admits your account has been compromised.

Personal data obtained through phishing scams, malware infection and even digitised physical documents is also traded on the dark web. Buyers then use the information to open accounts in your name, make fraudulent purchases and steal your money.

How can I remove my data from it?

The bad news is once your data is on the dark web, it's virtually impossible to remove. The anonymous nature of the dark web, coupled with its decentralised structure, makes it very difficult to track down your stolen information.

Even if you're able to find the darknet marketplace where your data is being sold, it's highly unlikely the person selling it or the administrator of the site will respond to your removal request. These are criminals, after all, who profit from exploiting others, so they're unlikely to develop a conscience just because you ask nicely.

Additionally, stolen data is frequently copied and shared across multiple marketplaces and forums, and browsing such sites can be risky and unpleasant.

Discover if your data is on the dark web

Get a dark-web report from Google

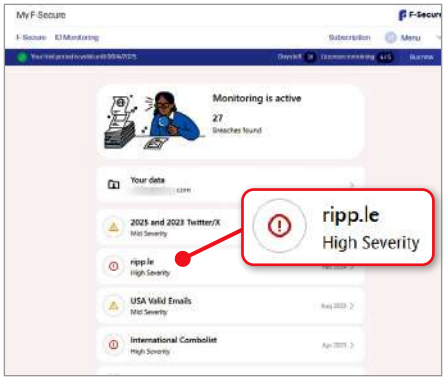
Last year, Google made its 'dark web report' feature available for free to users in the UK, US and dozens of other countries, having previously limited it to a Google One subscription. This lets you set up a monitoring profile for your Gmail address (personal accounts only – it's not available to business users) that tells you if your data has been found on the dark web.

To get a dark-web report, go to www.snipca.com/54849, sign into your Google account and click 'Start monitoring'. Select the information you want to look for, including your name, date of birth, phone number (up to three) and home address. Your Gmail address is automatically included and you can add up to nine other email addresses.

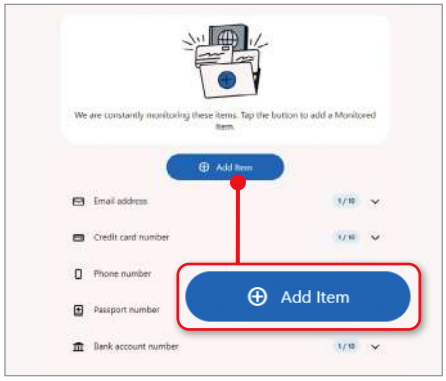
Click 'Done' and Google will generate your dark-web report. This provides a summary of all the data breaches that have leaked your information to the dark

31 data breaches leaked your info to the dark web.
1
You're monitoring the dark web
Summary of your results
2
View all results

Google will tell you if your personal data has been found on the dark web



F-Secure ID Protection rates the severity of breaches your data was involved in



F-Secure also scours the dark web for other personal information

web (1 in our screenshot above). Click 'View all results' 2 to see the full list, including the site or service that was breached, the data involved and the date it was discovered on the dark web.

Select an entry for further details, such as whether your password (which isn't included in your monitoring profile) was found. Google will notify you if information from your profile is detected in future dark-web leaks.

Monitor the dark web using F-Secure tools

Cybersecurity company F-Secure offers a free online tool for checking if your data has been exposed on the dark web. Enter your email address in the Identity Theft Checker (www.snipca.com/54852), click 'Check for breaches' and F-Secure will tell you how many breaches your address was found in. It also emails you a report containing full details – ours had the same information as Google's dark-web report.

For real-time dark-web monitoring, sign up for F-Secure Identity Protection (www.snipca.com/54854). This costs £39.99 a year, but you can try all its features for free for 30 days without entering payment-card details.

Select 'ID Monitoring' at the top of your account page and click Add Monitored Item. Enter your email address to check if it's appeared in a data breach and to be notified when it's detected in future breaches (at least for the rest of the 30-day free trial).

Unlike F-Secure's free tool, ID Protection rates the severity of each breach, from low to high (see screenshot above), and tells you exactly which information was exposed. This includes your usernames and full passwords – whereas Google's dark-web report conceals some letters with asterisks.

To check for information that isn't linked to your email address, click 'Your data' then Add Item (see screenshot above right). Select options – including phone number, bank account, credit card, passport number and driver's licence – to discover if those details have been leaked on the dark web. F-Secure says it will constantly monitor these items and alert you to future breaches.

Dark-web monitoring is also available in Norton 360 Premium – see our Reader Offer on page 70.

What to do if your data is found on the dark web

Change your passwords

If you've used a compromised password for other websites and apps, change it immediately for those accounts. Chrome's Password Checkup feature (type chrome://password-manager/checkup into Chrome's address bar) helpfully lists all your reused passwords and provides links to change them to strong new ones on the relevant sites. Many password managers, including Bitwarden and Proton Pass, offer a similar feature.

Set up 2FA for your accounts

Once dark-web criminals know your email address and password, they can take over and lock you out of your accounts. To stop this happening, set up two-factor authentication as quickly as you can, especially for your email account.

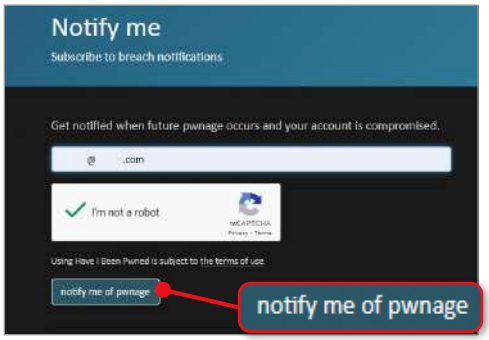
If possible, create a passkey too, which will link your account to your phone, so only you can sign into it.

Get push notifications for payments

Most mobile-banking and credit-card apps now have a push notifications feature that alerts you when payments are made from your account and when suspicious activity is detected. Make sure you have this option turned on, so you can freeze your card or account if your details are leaked to the dark web. ca

Does Have I Been Pwned scan the dark web?

We often recommend using Have I Been Pwned (HIBP, www.snipca.com/54857) to check if your email address has been exposed in a data breach. Although it doesn't claim to search the dark web for stolen account details, it's useful for learning about breaches that may result in your data ending up there. HIBP's list of 'pwned' websites (www.snipca.com/54862) mentions dozens of instances in which data subsequently appeared on darknet marketplaces.


Notify me
Subscribe to breach notifications
Get notified when future pwnage occurs and your account is compromised.
I'm not a robot
Using Have I Been Pwned is subject to the terms of use
notify me of pwnage
notify me of pwnage

You can use HIBP's 'Notify me' tool (www.snipca.com/54860, see screenshot) to receive alerts when your accounts are compromised. However, unlike the dark-web monitoring tools from Google and F-Secure, HIBP relies on publicly discovered and reported data breaches, and only searches for email addresses and passwords – not phone numbers and other personal information.

Problems Solved

Our experts solve all your tech problems

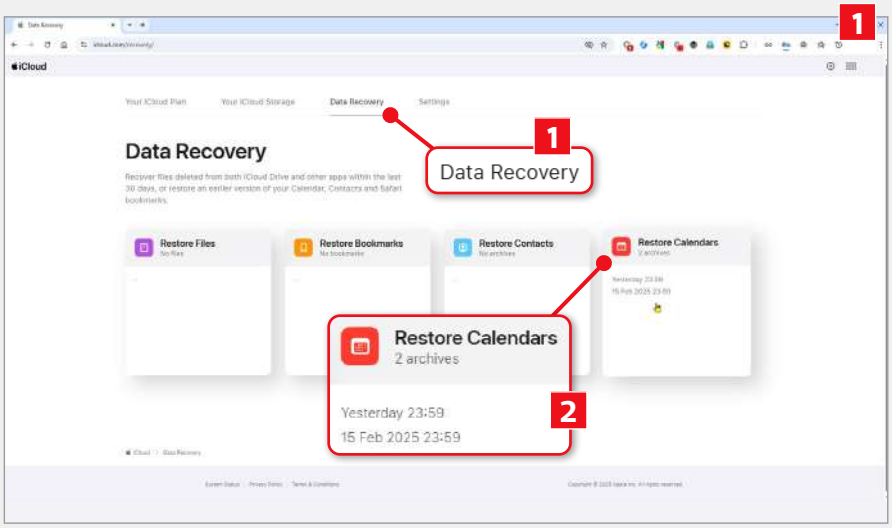
PROBLEM OF THE FORTNIGHT

How do I back up Apple Calendars?

Q First, thank you for an excellent magazine. I've been subscribing for years and never fail to find something useful in every issue.

After reading lots of advice about backups and archives, both in your pages and elsewhere, it occurred to me that I don't have a local copy of my Apple Calendar data. I always access it through iCloud on my PC, iPhone and iPad, so I'm looking for a way to back it up. The only instructions I found involved Outlook, but my attempts failed. I also tried importing the data into Google Calendar, but again without success. Is it really impossible to back up an iCloud Calendar? Any advice would be much appreciated.

Anne-Marie Nicol



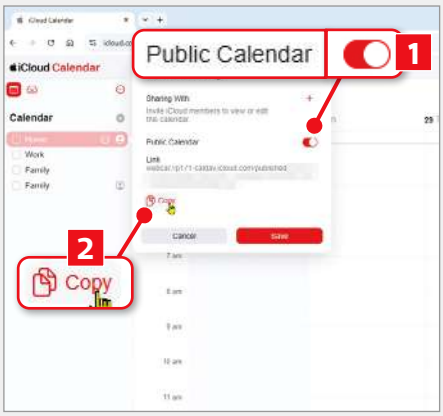
Apple's Calendar app keeps a couple of backed-up versions of your calendars in iCloud

A Apple would probably argue that its iCloud service *is* the backup. Data from Apple's Calendar app is typically synchronised across at least two devices, with the iCloud online service acting as both hub and archive. Indeed, if you visit www.icloud.com then click the Data Recovery tab (1 in our screenshot above right), you should see at least one or two Calendar backups 2 that you can restore (see screenshot below) if necessary.

To restore a Calendar, click the Restore button next to the backup you want

Of course, that's not much use if you get locked out of your Apple account. Unfortunately, unless you own a Mac, there is no easy way to export this data. If you do have a Mac, launch the Calendar app, then open the File menu before choosing Export followed by Export again. Next, choose a save location, then click Export to save the calendar as an ICS file (with a .ics extension). These are compatible with many modern calendar apps, including Google Calendar.

If you're not a Mac owner, you can use a workaround to extract this file. First, log into www.icloud.com then click to launch Calendar. Next, under the Calendar heading on the left, click the head-and-shoulders icon and then, next to Public Calendar, click the slider to the On position (1 in our screenshot below left). Don't worry, this won't make your calendar public unless you click Save, which you're not going to do.



Switch on Public Calendar, then click the Copy link to copy the URL to the Windows clipboard.

Instead, click the Copy link 2 to copy the URL to the Windows clipboard. Next, in a new browser tab, press Control (Ctrl)+V to paste the URL into the address bar, then delete the 'webcal' bit and instead type https at the start before pressing Enter. This will prompt Calendar to download a .ics version of your calendar so you have a local backup. Next, return to the iCloud tab, switch the Public Calendar slider back to its Off position, then click Save or Cancel.

Finally, to import the .ics file into Google Calendar, for example, open the Google Calendar web page and click the top-right Settings cog, then choose Settings. Next, on the left, click 'Import & export' followed by Import. Click 'Select file from your computer', navigate to your downloaded .ics file, select it and then click Open.

Can I connect my iPad to my old printer?

Q I have a Brother HL-2025 laser printer, which works fine when I connect it to my Windows 11 laptop using a cable. Now I have a new iPad, but my printer has no wireless connectivity. Is there something I can buy or download that will let me print from my iPad to this printer?

Dr Peter Rhodes

A We couldn't find any record of a Brother HL-2025 printer, so we think you must mean the HL-2035. That aside, this printer has been around since the late 2000s and is getting rather old. In fact, it was built before Apple introduced its AirPrint technology, which is what it would need to accept print jobs directly from an iPad or iPhone.

You could buy a wireless print server to act as a 'bridge' to your printer, but these tend to cost upwards of £50 and can be tricky to configure. Given that you can buy a brand-new Brother laser printer with Wi-Fi and AirPrint built in for around £99 (www.snipca.com/54598), it's hard to justify spending much to add this capability to an ageing device.

Set 'Service Startup' to Auto in Elpamsoft AirPrint Installer to use your PC as a bridge between an iPad and an ageing printer

A cheaper option is to use software on your PC to provide the necessary 'bridging' features. This does mean your PC needs to be switched on when you want to print from your iPad, but at least it's easy to set up and completely free if you use a tool called Elpamsoft AirPrint Installer. The developer seems to have abandoned this tool, but it still works well in Windows 11. You can download it for free from the Tweaks.com website. Visit www.snipca.com/54840 then scroll down and click Elpamsoft AirPrint Installer Download Mirror. It's safe, so ignore any security warnings that Windows or your browser might show.

Once installed, click the Install AirPrint Service button and set Service Startup to Auto (see screenshot). Then, in Windows 11's Settings, click 'Bluetooth & devices' followed by 'Printers & scanners'. Next, click your printer's name followed by 'Printer properties'. Now, click the Sharing tab followed by the Change Sharing Options button, then tick 'Share this printer'. Finally, type a name for the printer, then click OK. It should now appear as one of the available printers when you select the Print option in an iPad app.

What should I do with my old floppy disks?

Q How would you recommend I recycle or dispose of a large quantity of old floppy disks?

Alan Twiss

A Honestly, there's no simple way to do this. We assume you're talking about 3.5in disks (pictured), which are the most common type. These have a hard plastic casing, various metal parts and a polyester disk coated with a magnetic layer, which is protected by a felt liner. Then there are the labels, which add paper and glue into the mix. These things were simply not designed with recycling in mind.

If you're worried about data theft, you could prise each disk open and cut through the disc platter with scissors. You could then separate the component parts, some of which might be accepted by a local-authority recycling centre. As you say you have a lot of disks, however, that would be a lot of work. In that case, going at them with a sledgehammer would be a quicker way to ensure data security.

Old floppy disks are a nightmare to recycle, but they may be of interest to collectors

If you're not concerned about the contents, you could consider passing them on. Floppy disks are practically worthless now, but collectors of retro technology might be glad to take them off your hands. Use the Retro Directory site at https://retro.directory to find any that are local to you.

We explained how to access files stored on floppy discs in Issue 706's How To – buy a back issue from www.snipca.com/54696.

Is a CMOS battery stopping my ageing PC from booting?

Q My Dell OptiPlex 780 desktop PC displayed a 'low power' warning recently, which I assumed was referring to its CMOS battery. I replaced it, but now the PC won't boot. I went into the BIOS to set the time and date, and moved my SATA boot disk to the top of the boot order, but a message appeared saying the boot device can't be found.

I've never had this problem before. Any ideas?

Robert Woolley

A It's possible that your PC's BIOS may have reset its boot priority from UEFI to Legacy or vice versa (see screenshot). Your computer is pretty old (2010), so we're not sure if it even has that option, but if you find it in the BIOS, try switching from one to the other.

Otherwise, check that the data and power cables that attach the drive to the motherboard are connected securely at each end.

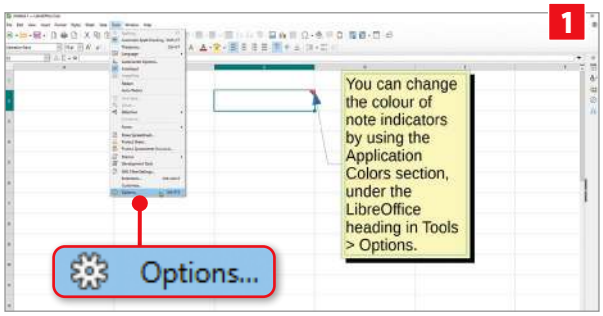
If that doesn't help, our final suggestion is to remove the CMOS battery for an extended period – an hour, say – to ensure the BIOS is fully reset. Then reinsert it and try again.

Switch the BIOS's boot priority from Legacy to UEFI if your PC won't start

Can I change the colour of comment boxes in LibreOffice Calc?

Q When I upgraded to the latest edition of LibreOffice recently I found that some familiar things had changed, including in the spreadsheet tool, Calc. Fellow reader Bob Farish noted this in Issue 706's Readers' Tips pages when he explained how to increase the size of the comment (note) indicator. I found his advice very useful. However, the default colour has also changed from red to an insipid violet. I can't find a setting to change it back, and Googling hasn't helped. Do you know how to fix it?

Chris Mellor

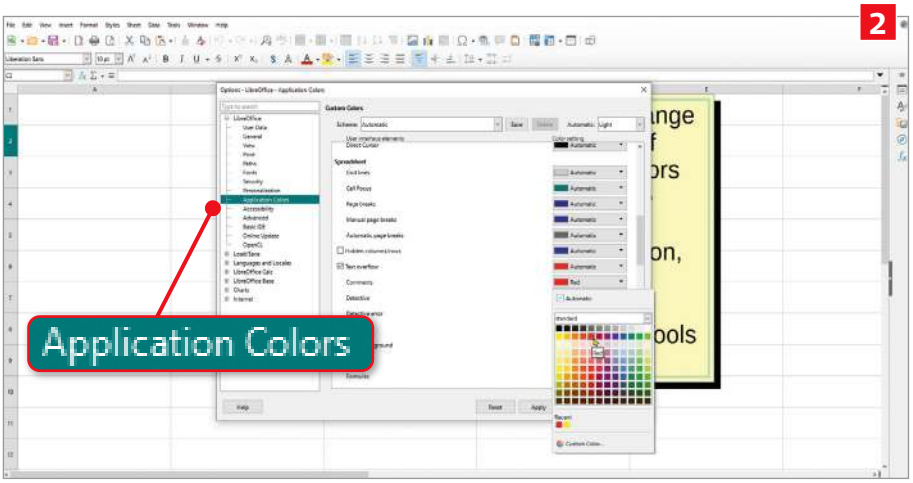

1
You can change the colour of note indicators by using the Application Colors section, under the LibreOffice heading in Tools > Options.
Options...

To change the colour of any component in Calc, start by selecting Options in the Tools menu

A Sometimes it feels as if software developers make changes just for the sake of it. Thankfully, you can customise the colour of almost any element of LibreOffice's interface with ease when you know how.

To change the colour of the comment (note) indicator, first open the Tools menu, then choose Options (see screenshot 1). Next, in the left-hand pane of the Options box, click to expand the LibreOffice category and then select Application Colors (see screenshot 2).

Next, in the right-hand pane, scroll down to the Spreadsheet heading and look for the Comments entry. Click to open the menu to the right of this, then select your preferred shade from the colour-swatch panel. Click OK to confirm your decision.



Select 'Application Colors' in the left-hand panel of Calc's Options box, then find Comments on the right and choose a colour

Q: Is it risky to replace my antivirus software?

A: Issue 691, page 67 – find it on our 2024 Back Issue CD

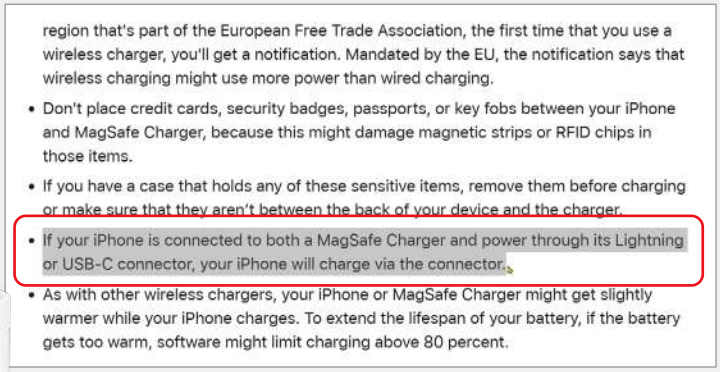
Buy it from www.snipca.com/53433

Can I dual-charge my iPhone?

Q This isn't really a problem as such, but I wonder if you can enlighten me. I have an iPhone 12 that I usually charge by plugging a cable into its Lightning port. However, I sometimes place it on the Qi wireless-charging spot on my mouse pad, because it's convenient – albeit a little slower. Charging by cable is quicker but can still take a while. I was wondering if my phone would charge faster if I used the Lightning cable and Qi spot at the same time. I haven't tried it yet because I don't want to risk damaging my phone.

Steven Lambert

Buying a new 20W iPhone power adaptor could speed up charging



region that's part of the European Free Trade Association, the first time that you use a wireless charger, you'll get a notification. Mandated by the EU, the notification says that wireless charging might use more power than wired charging.

- Don't place credit cards, security badges, passports, or key fobs between your iPhone and MagSafe Charger, because this might damage magnetic strips or RFID chips in those items.
- If you have a case that holds any of these sensitive items, remove them before charging or make sure that they aren't between the back of your device and the charger.
- If your iPhone is connected to both a MagSafe Charger and power through its Lightning or USB-C connector, your iPhone will charge via the connector.
- As with other wireless chargers, your iPhone or MagSafe Charger might get slightly warmer while your iPhone charges. To extend the lifespan of your battery, if the battery gets too warm, software might limit charging above 80 percent.

Sadly, you can't charge your iPhone faster by using wired and wireless charging at the same time, as Apple's website explains

A It's a nice idea, but sadly it won't work. That's because iPhones can detect when both charging methods are connected at the same time, in which case it disables its own MagSafe wireless-charging pad, prioritising the cable instead (www.snipca.com/54606, pictured above right). It does this because wired charging is always more efficient and generally faster than wireless. For reference, the iPhone 12 supports a maximum of 15W via MagSafe (or Qi) wireless charging, while the latest iPhones can handle up to 25W wirelessly.

So you won't damage your phone if you attach a Lightning cable while your iPhone rests on your Qi pad, but it won't charge any faster than the wattage output by your mains adapter either.

There may be another way to speed up your charging, however. Check the output wattage of your existing adapter, the details of which should be printed on it somewhere.

The iPhone 12 supports up to 20W wired charging, so if your current adapter delivers less than that, your phone isn't charging as quickly as it could. Apple stopped including adapters with iPhones from the iPhone 12 onwards, but the company sells its own 20W adapter for £19 (www.snipca.com/54600).

Can I resurrect my old laptop by attaching a mini PC?

Q I'm interested in buying a mini PC such as the GMKtec NucBox M5 Plus, reviewed in Issue 703 (page 23). Would it be possible to 'strap' this to an old laptop so the mini PC can use its screen and keyboard? If so, I would have a cheap, powerful PC-cum-laptop that I could use anywhere in my home, rather than having to sit at a desk in my office.

Graham Powell

You can buy a keyboard and mouse like this Amazon Basics set for less than £14

A mini PC with a portable monitor such as this Yodoit model is a cheap alternative to a laptop

A It's an interesting idea and probably not impossible for someone with sufficient technical knowledge and ambition. However, it's also fraught with complications that would make it very difficult to achieve.

For example, the old laptop's HDMI port – assuming it even has one – would need to support HDMI input as well as output. Very few do, so that alone would probably derail the project.

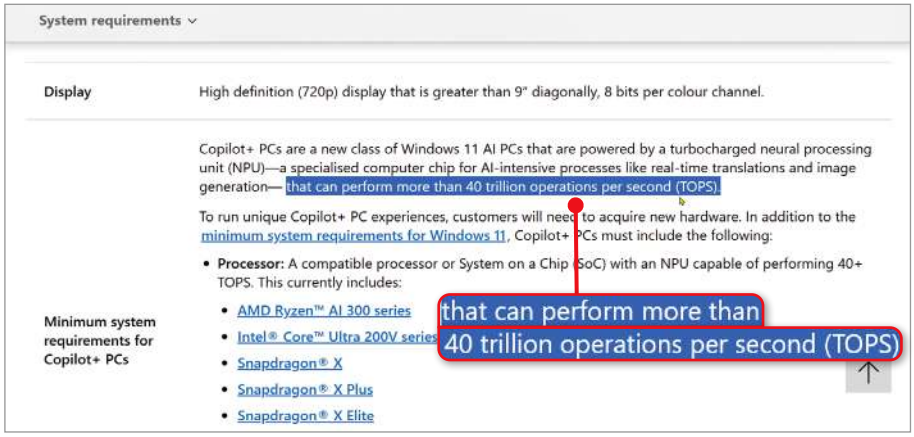
The same is almost certainly true of the laptop's keyboard. If you attached the two computers using a USB cable, the mini PC might recognise the laptop's keyboard and mouse as external input devices, but it's unlikely. Short of getting out a soldering iron and designing custom circuit boards, there would be no way forward.

In other words, it's not a feasible project for most people. If you want a mini PC that you can move easily around your home, a more practical idea is to buy a portable monitor (these start from around £75, www.snipca.com/54601, pictured 1). Add a wireless keyboard and mouse (around £14 from www.snipca.com/54602, pictured 2), and you'll have a portable system that costs under £100.

Why can't I find any Copilot+ desktop PCs?

Q Your 'What's the difference between CPUs and NPUs' panel in Issue 707's Problems Solved was very timely, because I'd been seeing a lot of stuff about Copilot+ and was wondering if my next PC should be compliant. It would have to be a desktop PC, but searching online revealed only laptops offering Copilot+ compliance. I couldn't find a single compliant desktop PC. Why is this? The Geekom A8 Max mini PC (pictured below) seems to be a step in the right direction, because it's described as Copilot but not Copilot+.

The Geekom A8 Max mini PC is described as Copilot but not Copilot+


System requirements
Display
High definition (720p) display that is greater than 9" diagonally, 8 bits per colour channel.
Copilot+ PCs are a new class of Windows 11 AI PCs that are powered by a turbocharged neural processing unit (NPU)—a specialised computer chip for AI-intensive processes like real-time translations and image generation— that can perform more than 40 trillion operations per second (TOPS).
To run unique Copilot+ PC experiences, customers will need to acquire new hardware. In addition to the minimum system requirements for Windows 11, Copilot+ PCs must include the following:
• Processor: A compatible processor or System on a Chip (SoC) with an NPU capable of performing 40+ TOPS. This currently includes:
Minimum system requirements for Copilot+ PCs
• AMD Ryzen™ AI 300 series
• Intel® Core™ Ultra 200V series
• Snapdragon® X
• Snapdragon® X Plus
• Snapdragon® X Elite
that can perform more than
40 trillion operations per second (TOPS)

Credit: Microsoft

To achieve Copilot+ status a PC must have an NPU chip that can handle a minimum of 40 TOPS

Apparently, a critical requirement is an NPU that can handle 40 trillion operations per second (TOPS), but this model manages just 39.

Rob Hindle

A This is simply a matter of market priorities. Laptops now outsell desktop PCs by a factor of four to one. As such, Microsoft and PC manufacturers have concentrated all their efforts into creating Copilot+ laptops. At the time of publication, only one neural processing unit (NPU) for desktop PCs comes close to Microsoft's 40 TOPS requirements for Copilot+ status (www.snipca.com/54603), and that's the AMD Ryzen 9 8945HS in the Geekom mini PC you mention. However, as it offers 39 TOPS, not 40, the PC doesn't quite meet Microsoft's Copilot+ demands (www.snipca.com/54697).

We think this is probably a short-term problem. Chip manufacturers Intel and AMD tend to announce their next-generation processors in the second half of each year. We'd expect the 2025 revisions to their respective desktop processors to deliver sufficient TOPS to achieve Copilot+ compliance.

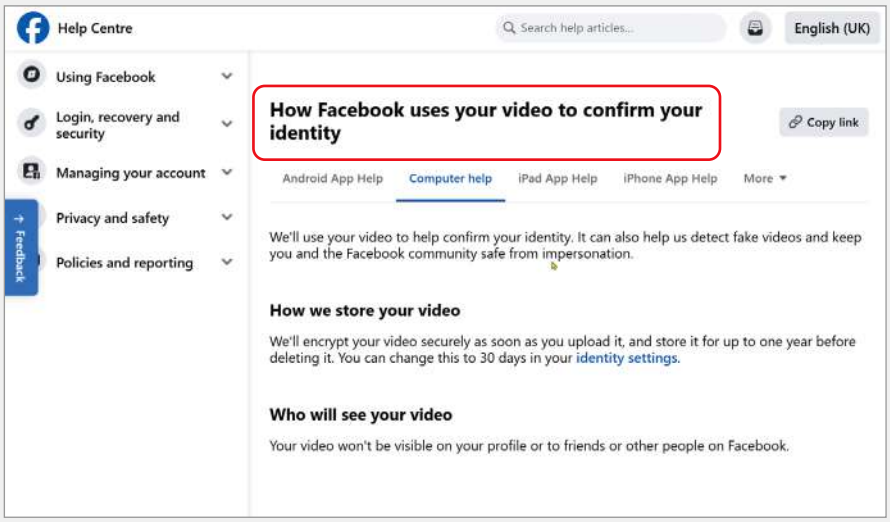
Why does Facebook want a video of me?

Q I got locked out of my Facebook account recently. Before I can get back in, the website has asked me to confirm my identity by submitting a 'video selfie'. Does Facebook usually ask for this, or is it a scam?

Nev Renshaw

A Facebook can and sometimes does ask for video selfies (see screenshot), but this is not necessarily to confirm your identity. In the first instance the company is checking that you're human. Facebook may also use AI or a human reviewer to compare the video you provide with photos and videos posted on your account. You can read more about it on the Facebook website, at www.snipca.com/54604.

Inevitably, though, there are scams that pretend to be messages from Facebook. If you know for sure that you've been locked out of your Facebook account and you're trying to log in through the Facebook website, it's likely that Facebook is asking for this video. If on the other hand the video request comes from a random email, you're right to be more cautious. It could simply be scammers trying to trick you into revealing personal information and imagery of yourself.


Help Centre
Search help articles...
English (UK)
Using Facebook
Login, recovery and security
Managing your account
Privacy and safety
Policies and reporting
Feedback
How Facebook uses your video to confirm your identity
Copy link
Android App Help
Computer help
iPad App Help
iPhone App Help
More
We'll use your video to help confirm your identity. It can also help us detect fake videos and keep you and the Facebook community safe from impersonation.
How we store your video
We'll encrypt your video securely as soon as you upload it, and store it for up to one year before deleting it. You can change this to 30 days in your identity settings.
Who will see your video
Your video won't be visible on your profile or to friends or other people on Facebook.

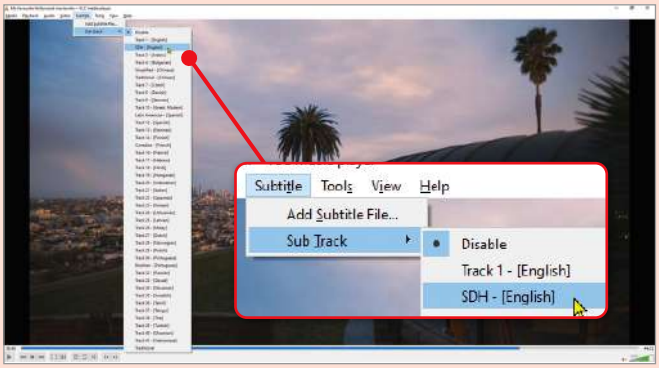
Facebook may ask for a video selfie to confirm your identity and make sure you're human

WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN...

Types of subtitles?

Q I'm not particularly computer savvy but I like to watch films on my Windows laptop, which my son puts on to USB sticks for me. I use VLC for this, which my son has also installed. As I'm getting a little hard of hearing, I've started using subtitles. I switch these on through VLC's Subtitles menu. Sometimes there are several options, such as 'CC' and 'SDH'. Occasionally, the video comes with a separate '.srt' file. I can usually get subtitles to appear, but I wonder what all these difference abbreviations mean. And am I better off using CC or SDH, for example, when both options are available?

Nancy Harper



Open the Subtitle menu in VLC to see which formats and languages are available for the film you're watching

A Subtitles can be quite a complicated topic, but we'll do our best to offer a summary.

Closed captions (CC) were the starting point for domestic TV subtitles, dating back to the 1970s. They were usually broadcast with the TV signal as part of teletext services such as Ceefax and Oracle but were not displayed by default – hence they were 'closed'. Viewers could 'open' (view) them by pressing a button on their TV's remote control.

Both the terminology and the basic idea have survived into the modern day, which brings us to 'subtitles for the deaf and hard of hearing', or SDH. These are very similar to CC, but tend to have a few extra accessibility elements, such as speaker identification and other cues, including descriptions of off-screen noises. However, CCs can have these too, so the differences are not so simple. Both types are 'embedded' in the original streaming source or video file, so you don't need a separate subtitle file.

Finally, there is SRT, which stands for SubRip Subtitle. This indicates that the subtitles have been 'ripped' from a DVD, for example, and placed as text into a .srt file. Programs such as VLC can use these separate .srt files to apply subtitles on screen. However, .srt data is often embedded in many popular video formats, so you won't always see a separate file.

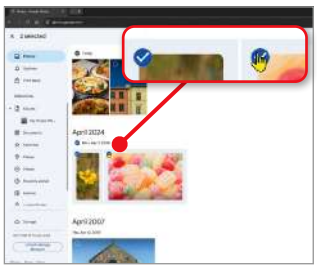
In your case, SDH is likely to be the best option (see screenshot), but sometimes you'll just need to experiment with the options you're offered to see what works best for you and the particular film you're watching.

Want to know the difference between technical terms? Email noproblem@computeractive.co.uk

How do I recover my Picasa photos?

Q I still have some old photos and documents in my Picasa account. Can you tell me how to download them? I've tried and it seems impossible.

David Phillip



Log into Google Photos to find your long-lost Picasa images

A We're not sure if you were using Picasa online or still have the final version of the desktop app installed. Either way, Google discontinued its Picasa service around 10 years ago, so even if you have the desktop app, it will no longer interact with any of Google's services.

We think this may be what's tripping you up, because although it's still possible to download the desktop version of Picasa from a handful of trustworthy sites (such as MajorGeeks – www.snipca.com/54605), and it even works in Windows 11, your attempts to log in will fail because Google won't allow it.

If you visit the online home of Picasa, at https://picasa.google.com, you'll see a message telling you that Picasa is no longer available. However, it also explains that you can access any pictures you stored in Picasa Web Albums (as they were known) through Google Photos. This is what you need to do.

Log into Google Photos, at https://photos.google.com, using the Google or Gmail account you used with Picasa. We suspect it's the same Gmail account you used to email us. Then simply tick any photos (see screenshot) you want to download, before clicking the menu button (three dots, top right) and choosing Download.

Alternatively, if you want to download an entire album of photos, click the album's name on the left, then open the menu and choose 'Download all'.

Next Issue

ON SALE **Weds 18 June**

- Why can't I print with an AMD processor?
- Why is my OneDrive stuck?
- How do I keep my landline number?

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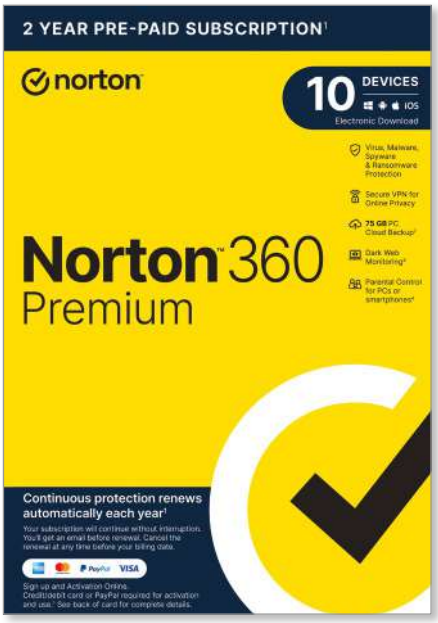

Norton is made by NortonLifeLock Inc – a standalone company dedicated to consumer cyber safety. It has always performed strongly in *Computeractive* antivirus tests, so we highly recommend it.

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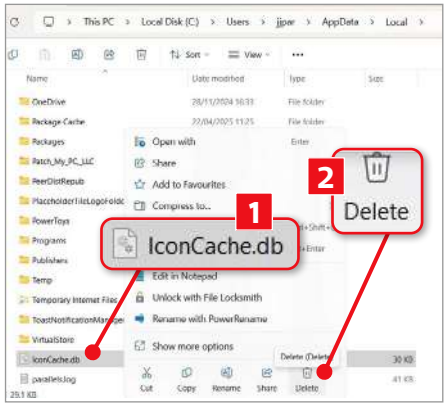
Why can't I fix my image problem by deleting the thumbnail cache?

Q I was interested in your solution to Bob Wellcoat's problem in Issue 708 (page 68): 'Why have my image-file thumbnails disappeared?' I have the same problem: some image files on my computer appear as blue icons rather than thumbnails of the image. However, your instructions to delete the thumbnail cache made no difference. Can you offer any further assistance?

Peter Ashton

A Try repeating the process (using Disk Cleanup as we originally described), then restart your PC and leave it switched on (and connected to the mains, if it's a laptop) for several hours afterwards. It can take Windows quite a long time to rebuild the thumbnail cache after deleting it, which may explain why you're not seeing the effects straight away. If you're still having the same problem, there are several other things you can try.

Have you set your View settings to 'Small icons' by accident? Thumbnails only show in File Explorer if your icons are set to medium or above. Click 'View' in File Explorer's toolbar and make sure 'Medium-sized icons' or larger is selected. It's also worth opening File Explorer and clicking View, Options, then View (Windows 10) or clicking the three-dots icon, Options, then View (Windows 11) and making sure that the 'Always show icons, never thumbnails' box is unticked.



Delete the 'IconCache.db' file manually if Disk Cleanup isn't working

Are the thumbnails that show up as blue icons stored on your PC or in your OneDrive folder? If the latter, right-click the affected files and select 'Always keep on this device'. This will download a copy of the file to your PC, which should refresh its thumbnail. If you don't want to keep a copy, right-click them again and select 'Free up space' – the thumbnails should remain.

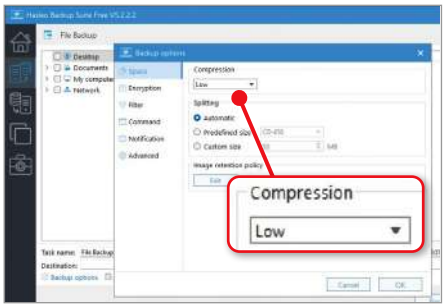
You could also delete the thumbnail cache manually. In File Explorer, open the View options, as described above, and make sure 'Show hidden files, folders and drives' is selected. Then navigate to the **C:\Users\%username%\AppData\Local<B> folder** (where **%username%** is your actual Windows username). Locate the 'IconCache.db' file (1 in our screenshot below left) and delete it 2. Reboot your PC and leave it running for a while, to allow Windows time to rebuild the cache.

Why did Hasleo backup take so long?

Q After reading your review of Hasleo Backup Suite (Issue 706, page 19, www.snipca.com/53669), I backed up 28GB of photo files to a 2TB external SSD. This took about one minute. It was saved as a DBI file, and so I couldn't access it directly, unlike files I previously backed up using SyncToy (which has been discontinued). For peace of mind, I restored the file to a 64GB USB stick. What surprised me was that it took nearly one hour to restore the 28GB file. Why did it take so long?

Eric Page

A There could be several reasons. USB sticks (particularly older, cheaper models) often have low write speeds, which would slow the process down. But also check whether the stick is plugged into a USB 2.0 port on your PC, or if the drive itself only supports USB 2.0 speeds. This would also limit the write speed.



Hasleo uses 'Low' compression by default, which can slow the restore process

In addition, Hasleo Backup Suite uses compression to create its backup file – it's set to Low by default (click 'Backup options', then Space to see the Compression settings – see screenshot above). Compressed backups need to be decompressed again before writing the files to the drive. Decompressing large backups can use a lot of resources and slow the restore process.

Why can't I block spam calls on my iPhone?

Q I read Issue 709's Cover Feature on blocking spam calls, and followed the instructions to turn on 'Call Blocking & Identification' on my iPhone. If I go into Settings, then into Apps, there is a Phone app, but it doesn't contain the options as shown in your screenshot. I'm running iOS 18.4.1, which should be fine according to your advice.

Kevin Beasley

A You're right – our original instructions work for iOS 17, but in iOS 18, Apple moved the Phone settings, so you now need to tap Settings, Apps, then Phone to find them. We apologise for any confusion this may have caused. As for 'Call Blocking & Identification' – if this option is not available, it probably means your mobile network doesn't support the feature by default. Fix this by installing one of the call-identification apps we recommended (Truecaller, Hiya or Call Blocker).

Jargon Buster

32bit/64bit A measure of how much data a PC can process at once. Most older computers are 32bit, more modern ones are 64bit.

3G/4G/5G Technologies that deliver faster mobile broadband.

4K Video with a resolution of at least 3840x2160 pixels.

720p/1080p/1440p Common types of high-definition video of 1280x720, 1920x1080 and 2560x1440 pixels respectively.

Accelerometer A sensor that detects movement. Used in smartphones to decide whether or not to display a portrait or landscape screen, control games or even work as a spirit level.

AMOLED Active-Matrix Organic Light-Emitting Diode. An alternative technology to LCD for creating flat-panel displays. Most commonly used in smartphones, tablets and smartwatches.

Bandwidth A measure of how much data can be transferred through a connection at one time.

Batch file Commands that are processed in sequence, often without requiring input from the user.

Benchmarking Comparing software and products with an accepted standard.

Beta A version of software that's being tested.

Biometric Using measurable personal characteristics, such as fingerprints, for identification.

BIOS Basic Input-Output System. Software built into every PC that connects the vital components.

Bootable Describes a device or disc with system files on it so it can be used to start up your computer.

Cache A temporary space for storing information. Can be memory used on a computer processor, or space on a hard drive used by a web browser.

CAPTCHA Distorted text you have to type to prove you're a human.

Caret browsing A special mode in some web browsers (including Firefox and Internet Explorer) that uses the keyboard to navigate web pages.

Chatbot A computer program designed to recreate conversation with human users, especially over the internet.

Clickbait Online articles that use deliberately sensationalised or misleading headlines to tempt people to click through to them.

Client A program that acts as an interface between PC and server.

CMOS Complementary metal-oxide semiconductor. A battery that powers the BIOS firmware in your laptop. When a laptop is unplugged, BIOS relies on the CMOS battery for power.

Code Programming languages used to create software.

Command line A way to control a computer by typing instructions one at a time. In Windows this is called Command Prompt.

Cookie A small text file stored on your computer by a website. Used to store browsing preferences, website log-in details and so on.

Copilot+ An enhanced version of Microsoft's Copilot AI tool. Also used to classify Windows 11 computers with a neural processing unit (NPU) that can perform over 40 trillion operations per second (TOPS).

Core Units on a processor that carry out program instructions.

Cryptocurrency A digital currency not backed by any country. The most popular is Bitcoin.

Dark web Websites that can only be accessed using special software such as the Tor browser.

DBI A backup image format used by Hasleo Backup Suite.

Domain These are used to identify one or more IP addresses.

Driver A file that tells Windows how to work with an external device.

Dual boot To set up a PC with two operating systems, so that one must be chosen each time it starts.

Emoji A small graphic that can be inserted into a text or email.

End-to-end encryption A way of encrypting messages so that the only people who can read them are the sender and recipient.

Ethernet A standard used for almost all wired computer networks.

Fingerprinting A tracking method used by websites to identify you from the device and software you're using.

Firmware Basic software stored on hardware, such as a processor, to control its operation.

Fps Frames per second. See 'Frame rate' below.

Frame rate The number of still images, or frames, shown per second to create a moving image. Higher frame rates make games appear smoother and more realistic.

GHz Gigahertz. A measure of how many instructions a chip can process per second. 1GHz is equal to 1,000MHz.

GIF Graphics Interchange Format. A type of image file often used on the web, but now largely superseded by PNG.

Graphics card A component in a computer that produces the image shown on the monitor.

GSM Grams per Square Metre. Used to measure the weight of paper.

Gyroscope A tiny sensor that detects how a phone is turning or twisting in space.

HDMI High-definition media interface. A type of connection that transmits high-definition video and audio signals.

HDR10+ High-dynamic range 10. Current industry standard for TVs.

Hz Hertz. Measures the frequency something happens: 1Hz equals once a second.

IMEI Integrated Mobile Equipment Identity. A unique number used to identify each mobile phone.

IP68 International Protection marking. The '6' denotes that a device is resistant to dust, general dirt and sand. The '8' indicates that it can be placed underwater for 30 minutes at depths of up to 1.5m without effect.

ISO file A type of image file that contains data from a CD or DVD.

LAN Local-area network. A computer network in one place, such as a home or office.

Large language model A type of artificial intelligence algorithm that analyses huge amounts of data sets to summarise and create content.

LED Light-emitting diode. An electronic device that emits light. Used on almost all electronic devices, and to provide the backlight for some LCDs.

Lightning connector Apple's own connector that connects iPhones and iPads to computers, monitors, cameras, chargers and more.

Liquid Retina Apple's term for its high-quality, edge-to-edge LCD screens with rounded corners, vibrant colours, and sharp resolution, used in devices like iPhones and iPads.

MagSafe A magnetic technology from Apple that allows for wireless charging and attaching accessories.

NPU Neural processing unit. Specialised chip designed for performing AI tasks.

OLED Organic light-emitting diode. A thin-film organic light-emitting diode used in computer displays and television screens.

Onion address URLs for websites on the dark web, accessible only through the Tor browser.

Open source Software that can be modified by anyone, rather than just by the employees of the company that created it.

Partition A large hard drive can be split into two or more partitions or 'virtual' drives.

Passkey A method for signing into accounts by typing a one-off code, fingerprint or facial recognition rather than a password.

PCI Peripheral Component Interconnect. A high-performance expansion slot for desktop PCs.

Phishing A form of internet fraud that tries to trick you into revealing personal details.

Polling rate How often your mouse tells your computer where it is on screen. Measured in Hz.

Push notification A message from an app that appears on a phone or tablet, even when you're not using the app.

Qi Pronounced 'chee', it's the main standard for wireless charging.

QR code A barcode that can be read using smartphones.

RAM Random-access memory. The computer's working area, used for data storage while the PC is switched on.

Refresh rate Measured in Hertz (Hz), the number of times per second that the image on your monitor is redrawn.

Refurbished A second-hand device that has been repaired by its manufacturer so that it can be resold and reused.

RJ-45 Registered Jack-45. Connectors usually found on the end of Ethernet cables. Also called modular connectors.

SATA Serial ATA. An interface for connecting hard drives and optical discs to a computer.

Script A short program that is stored on a web server to control part of a website. For example, a script could check that a date you have entered is valid, or move words across the screen.

Secure Boot A security standard designed to make sure your PC avoids malware when booting.

SIM Subscriber Identity Module. The smart card used by all digital mobile phones.

SSD Solid-state drive. Storage that, unlike a hard drive, uses no moving parts.

TOPS Trillion operations per second. A measure of a PC's processing power when performing AI tasks.

Travel The distance the keys of a keyboard have to be pressed before the keystroke is recognised.

Two-factor authentication A system that uses two different means to identify the user. For example, a code sent to your phone in addition to a password.

UEFI Unified Extensible Firmware Interface. A modern replacement for the BIOS.

Ultrawide Offering a field of view that's wider than traditional digital cameras.

USB 2.0/3.0/3.1/3.2/4.0 Faster successors to USB.

USB-A The original type of USB connector, released in 1996.

USB-C A connector that's reversible.

VESA Video Electronics Standards Association. A standard mount for attaching monitors on to stands, walls and PCs.

Widget A small program such as a calendar that runs on the Windows desktop.

WMV Windows Media Video. A Microsoft file format for video.

Wi-Fi 6 Wi-Fi standard with speeds up to 10 times faster than 802.11ac. Also called 802.11ax.

Write speed How long it takes a hard drive to save data.

Broadband Deals

	Provider	Package Name	Monthly Price	Contract Length	Broadband Speed	Reward*	First-year Cost*
1	vodafone	Fibre Fibre 150	**£26.00** £29.00 from 1st April 2026	24 Months	**150Mbps** avg. speed	**£130** Gift Card	CHEAPEST **£185.00**
2	sky	Full Fibre 150	**£24.00** Price could change during contract	24 Months	**150Mbps** avg. speed	**£80** Gift Card	**£208**
3	BT	Full Fibre 500	**£34.99** £37.99 from 31st March 2026	24 Months	**500Mbps** avg. speed	**£50** Gift Card	**£372.88**
4	Virgin media	M125	**£23.99** £27.49 from April 2026 Bill	18 Months	**132Mbps** avg. speed	**£80** Bill Credit	**£211.38**

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*Reward subject to change. Available as of 21st May 2025.

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Know How

Wondering why his download speeds are so variable, **Robert Irvine** tries to...

Measure his internet quality

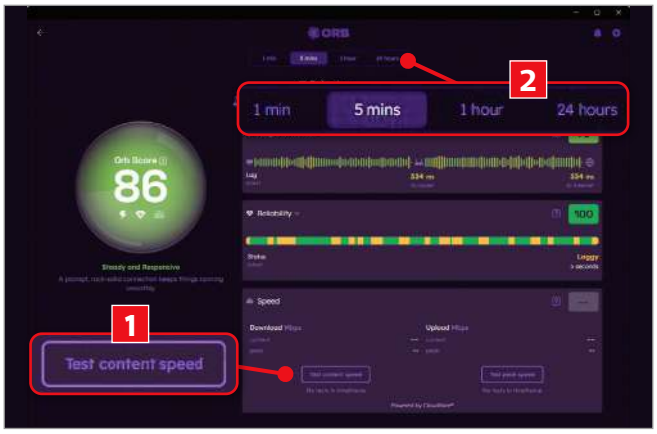
A weird thing happened to me recently. When I tested my laptop's internet connection using 'Speedtest by Ookla' (www.speedtest.net), the download speed was 19.6Mbps. But when I tested the connection to my phone using the Speedtest app, the speed was 11Mbps. Both devices were connected to the same Wi-Fi network, and placed next to each other, and no other people were present. Spooky, eh?

> The quality of your connection is more important than the speed

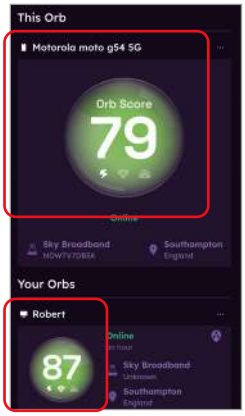
When I performed the test again five minutes later, on my laptop and phone simultaneously, the speeds dropped to 7.8Mbps and 4.9Mbps respectively. Considering I pay for 'up to' 50Mbps broadband, these results were disappointing – and also confusing.

Why had the speed more than halved over such a short time, and why was there a difference between adjacent devices? When I ran the test again, with even bigger discrepancies, I wondered if 'Speedtest by Ookla' is still the most reliable way to test one's internet connection.

So I was interested to read about a new, free tool called Orb (www.snipca.com/54841), from the team who founded Ookla and created Speedtest. Rather than just run quick tests. Orb "continuously monitors the quality of your internet connections, from any platform or device". It measures responsiveness,



Orb measures the responsiveness, reliability and speed of your internet connection



Robert's phone had a lower Orb Score than his laptop

reliability *and* speed, to give your connection an overall Orb Score. This sounded ideal, so I downloaded its Windows app from www.snipca.com/54842, and signed up for an Orb account.

When the app opened, it showed my Orb Score in a green circle. This was '86', which sounded impressive but was meaningless without other information. I clicked the circle and Orb displayed two graphs showing real-time data about the responsiveness and reliability of my connection.

Clicking the question-mark icon next to the Responsiveness graph explained that it "conveys how fast and smoothly a network responds when you ask it to do something". The Reliability graph, meanwhile, charts "the consistency and dependability of a network to perform its tasks without interruptions".

I welcomed these clear explanations, but noticed the Speed section was currently empty. To remedy this, I clicked the 'Test content speed' button (1 in our screenshot above) and let Orb get to work. Its results were 9.1Mbps download and 6.6Mbps upload, which reduced my overall Orb Score to 78 – 'Quick and Steady'. I also clicked 'Test peak speed', which increased the figures to 12Mbps and 11Mbps respectively.

This was all very interesting, and clicking the tabs at the top of the screen let me switch between data from the past minute, five minutes, hour and 24 hours 2. To get a fuller picture of my internet quality, I installed Orb's Android app (www.snipca.com/54844) on my phone – it also has apps for iOS, macOS and Linux – and signed into my account.

Cleverly, the Android app automatically detected my laptop as an Orb sensor on the same network, and displayed current data from the Windows app – which did so vice versa. This allowed me to easily compare the quality of both devices' internet connections.

My phone's Orb Score was initially 79, while the laptop's had crept up to 87 (see screenshot above). Delving into the data revealed the connection to the former was less responsive and reliable, presumably because phones have more going on in the background. Both their Orb Scores fluctuated throughout the day, ranging from the mid-70s ('Usable and Steady') to the early-90s ('Rock Solid and Ready').

I plan to install Orb on further devices, turning them into sensors that will keep a close watch on my home network. As Orb stresses, and I've now learned, the quality of your internet connection is more important than the speed.

Need help measuring your internet quality? Let us know: noproblem@computeractive.co.uk

Next issue: Robert tries to create his own chatbot

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